Prince of Thieves

Myshu

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This story was first published on January 30th, 2007, and was last updated on October 30th, 2007.

FicLab ID: Lrlw8kcc/lo34qqs8/B5000E5S

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Summary

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title	Prince of Thieves
author	Myshu
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3368230/
published	January 30th, 2007
updated	October 30th, 2007
words	110,062
chapters	18
status	Complete
rating	Fiction M
tags	Complete, Fanfiction, Final Fantasy IX, Freya C., Games

Description:

200 years after the Mist War, Luthane Crescent goes on a pilgrimage to seek out his heritage. All he's found is a Genome with a wild streak and a big secret...

1. Recruitment

A/N: It’s that time of year again: my writing season. Here’s something new, ever-crazier. It’s too late to help me now.

(“You’ve got someone to see you, Boss.”)

He stood outside the office on the top floor of Ultima Express’s corporate building, listening with large, keen ears to the conversation within.

(“Someone. Who?”)

The hall he was left waiting in more resembled a hotel than an avenue of business. The wool carpet runner bore a bright red, tribal zig-zag pattern and was plushly kempt, even if it didn’t match the gilded sconces and antique Gizamalukian vase. A painting of a fox in the woods adorned one wall, and across, a painting of an eagle in the sky.

(“Some rat.”)

He frowned at the pejorative. It was simple enough for other races to lump Burmecians and

Cleyrans together and dismiss them as “rats.” Actually being demi-rodents didn’t make the slur any less offensive.

(“That’s great. Does he or she have a name?”)

His friends called him Luth. His full name was gangly and a little too sinister for his tastes.

(“I ’unno.”)

(“So you let this random Burmecian of indeterminate gender walk through the door and get an appointment with me.”)

It was duly unfair to assume he was a Burmecian, even if it was a lucky guess. Or maybe not; he was clad in the blue tunic and pale canvas pants that his countryfolk still considered high fashion, never mind the rest of the world trumping the rustic outfit many, many, many embarrassing generations ago.

(“Uh, it’s a guy. And he’s not armed! We checked.”)

Hmm, he was just thinking that, despite the awkward pat-down, it was suspiciously easy to pass through security.

(“Good to know! Mother of Fuck, Berto. You could ask for their damn name while you’re feelin’

them up! I might not want to see this guy!”)

His ears drooped and his stomach drew into itself as the sense of being unwelcome sank in.

(“Sorry, Boss. Won’t happen again.”)

(“Yeah, I’ll let you off the hook this time. Bring him in.”)

Luth steeled himself as the heavy wooden door cracked and Berto the demi-tapir shuffled out. “Boss’ll see you now,” he grunted and ambled down the hall on thick legs.

“Thank you…” he barely heard his manners speak over his drumming heart as he pressed through the opening.

“Boss” kept a warm, well-worn space. Lindblum Grand Castle was distantly visible through the west window, from which the late afternoon sun filtered through slatted blinds and painted the oaken tables and walls in gold bars. A fangskin rug was planted in the middle of a false wooden floor. Paper trash wrappers and pizza boxes were shoved against the walls and under the small sofa beneath the window. In the corner, a bean cushion was parked in front of a television station (one a few decades out-of-date), accompanied by a sprawl of video gaming

paraphernalia. A giant replica of an ancient map of Gaia hung behind the heavy desk at the head of the room, upon which an old-fashioned typewriter, an electric pencil sharpener and a jade-shaded office lamp squatted over a spread of vanilla folders.

The chief executive officer of Ultima Express was… relaxing at his desk, if that was the best way to describe it. He sat sidelong in a faux-leather chair, one bare foot propped on the counter, one elbow against an armrest and his chin resting in his hand. He was a lithe, boyish creature in loose blue jeans, an open flannel jacket and a white undershirt. His sandy-blonde hair was striped white, not unlike a trend of hair-bleaching that was wildly popular in Treno of late.

“Can you believe that?” Boss introduced, glaring straight at his visitor. “I don’t even know who the hell you are and you’ve just waltzed right into my office. You could be the goddamn King of Burmecia and I wouldn’t have had any warning.”

It was everything eccentric about him and the flick of a slender, feline tail that clued Luth to the fact that he was looking at a Genome. It was a rare enough sight; one didn’t meet many of that ilk, even in Lindblum, the cultural capital of the world.

Largely reclusive, Genomes congregated in tiny settlements off the Mist Continent, practicing some outlandish religion that claimed they came to Gaia from another world. Most took them for lunatics and left them alone.

The Burmecian had little time to consider Boss's sanity before he was addressed again. "Cat got your tongue, kid?"

An indignant jolt skittered up Luth's spine. It wasn't an unfriendly question, neither curt nor impatient; if anything, the lazy reclining and slight quirk to Boss's lips suggested amusement. The only problem for Luth was that this young man—and he really looked young, at best in his twenties—just called him a kid!

"No," he finally replied, and at the petulant note in his voice the Genome's smirk broadened.

"Eheheh, you can relax. I'm not gonna bite your head off." His expression leveled. "Unless you really are the King of Burmecia. You're not, are you?"

When Luth shook his head, Boss lightly quipped, "Good, I like you better already. That guy's a prick. You can tell him I said so."

While the Burmecian's mind fumbled around traitorous notions, the Genome plowed ahead. "So, what's your name?"

He shook himself steady and answered, "Luthane Crescent," trying to muster all his pride. He wanted to make a strong impression, even for this mockery of professionalism. "I do hail from Burmecia," he added as a matter-of-fact.

"Crescent?" Boss's brow rose with renewed interest. "Really?"

"Yes, why?"

Boss shrugged. "Nothing really. I'm pretty good friends with the Crescent family."

"Yes, that's actually why I'm here. I need to—"

"What's your mother's name?"

"Er, pardon?"

"Your mother. She has a name, right?"

"Celia…" He was growing unnerved under the erratic scrutiny. "Celia Crescent."

"Ah. I keep forgetting you Burmecians still take your family names from the mother's side." He

rolled his wrist. “Go on, go on.”

Luth swallowed and proceeded. “I’m here about my great, great-great-grandmother, the legendary Dragon Knight Freya Crescent.”

A pensive shadow fell over Boss as his gaze dipped to the desktop.

“I recently acquired her diary, an old family heirloom…”

The stoic wave was replaced with a flash of alarm, Boss’s eyes flaring a bit as he straightened in his seat. “Whoa, hold it.”

Luth held his breath as Boss fished into a desk drawer and produced a pack of cigarettes. He promptly lit one in his mouth and offered his guest another. “Want a smoke?”

The Burmecian’s muzzle crinkled with distaste. “No thanks, I don’t—”

“That’s good. They say these things’ll kill ya. Ehehehehehehe.” His cynical laughter coasted through an obscure joke and died on a somber note. “Heh. Ahem. So, you want to know about your great-great-great-grandmother.”

“Yes, yes I do. Anything you can tell me, please,” he entreated.

“I gotta ask: why?”

“I’m, um, I was training to become a Dragon Knight. For my Pilgrimage, I must rediscover my heritage—”

Boss grimaced and waved him off. “Oh no no no, not that Pilgrimage crap. I didn’t know you guys still did that, either. Man, Burmecia’s like a damn time capsule.”

With a fluid bounce, he was on his feet and pacing around the desk. “Okay, so you think because of *my* ancestry I might know a thing or two about *yours*. That almost makes sense, but what’s so great about the past, kid? Maybe it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. Maybe it’s more than you wanted to know.” After one more brisk drag, he snuffed out his cigarette on a glass coaster, stopped and faced the Burmecian, his arms crossed challengingly. “Some people are better off not looking.”

Luth wouldn’t be daunted. He extended a big, tawny hand, beseeching, “I still want to know. I have to know.”

Boss stared hard at him. His eyes were like his voice: clear as a deep lake, wide-set and easygoing, yet in the shallows just a little feral—just a little crazy. “You’re stubborn…” His mien cracked with another grin. “But I like you. You’re honest, kid. You’re also the first Burmecian on his Pilgrimage with the balls to come to me. Not that I can help you much. I mean, shit, you’ve got your supergranny’s diary there. That should tell you more about your family than I ever could.”

“Oh.” Crestfallen, Luth trudged back the way he came. “I see. I’m sorry to waste your time.”

“H-Hey now, wait a sec.” When Luth glanced back, he was asked, “What do you do?”

The demi-rat blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“I mean, for a living. What do you do?”

“Actually…” Luth was frank, “I was hoping the answer I received here would help me figure that out. The pledge I made for my Pilgrimage was to find my path in life.”

Boss brightened with some mischievous brand of authority and skipped to the door ahead of Luth. “No shit? So you’re looking for work? Wait right there.”

The Burmecian floundered for a second in his wake. “Well, wait, not exactly…”

He was too late; Boss had already stuck his head into the hall and bellowed, “Hey, Berto!”

“Hey, Boss!” the familiar tapir called back from several doors away.

“Weren’t you in the mail room, like, last week?”

“Yeah, Boss.”

“Who promoted you?”

“You did, Boss.”

“Oh. Well never mind, go back.”

“Aw man…” Berto was heard whining into the distance as Boss leaned back into the room. He turned to Luth and eagerly clapped him on the shoulder.

“Wha’daya know, a position just opened up. You’re hired.”

Luth practically gagged. “W-What?!”

2. The Grand Tour

2. The Grand Tour

Before Luth knew how and what he was acquiescing, he was being led down the hall, one guiding hand on his arm. “Walk with me, kid.”

He planted his heels to brake just outside the elevator. “Whoa, wait a minute!”

Boss pressed the down button. “What, you’ve got somewhere else to be?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Great, we can start right away!” The lift arrived with a pleasant ding. Boss swept Luth and his wits inside. ‘I wanna show you around.’ He stirred the air with a careless hand. “Oh, and don’t worry about Berto. He bounces around here like a flea. He’s a good fellow.” He tossed Luth a sympathetic look and tapped his temple. “Just got a case of the *slows*. I keep him on the payroll as a favor to his old man.”

Luth shook his head dazedly, not on the same page at all. “No, I mean, wait, I don’t want a job here!”

Boss leaned back a notch, acting surprised. “You don’t? You should’ve said something before.”

The elevator opened at the fourth floor, and their swift pace resumed. Luth practically had to trot to keep up. “I—you—are you *insane*?”

“The best kind, Lu,” Boss confessed merrily. “Can I call you Lu?”

“I don’t—”

“Relax, it’s easy work. And good money. And experience! You get to travel all over the world. That’s all your Pilgrimage is anyway, right? You’ll love it; all you have to do is put up with me.”

“I don’t… know…” Luth trailed off as they encountered an indoor tram. It had neither wheels nor rails, and sat in its clean, empty trough like a big bird nest in a pearly plastic shell.

Boss climbed into the tram’s donut-shaped bench and waved his recruit inside. “Com’on, hop in.”

“I really don’t know about this,” the Burmecian tried again, muddled over both the strange transport and the opportunity being thrust at him. He hardly had both feet inside the car when Boss flicked a

switch on the dashboard and the tram jumped into life with an electro-magnetic whirr.

Luth was rolling into a sane position while Boss and the car continued at twenty miles-per-hour, “Don’t think so hard! Just say yes. I’ve been looking for someone like you for a while.”

He settled in time to watch an outdoor docking bay pan beyond the light blue windows of the tram tunnel. Beneath their feet, trucks, carts and roving ladders with big wheels and peeling yellow lights lumbered around the concrete lot, while flagmen in bright orange vests danced around taxiing airships. “You have?”

“Sure.” Boss kicked back and splayed a hand over his chest with an assured smile. ‘You see, this is a family business—that is, it’s like a family. I am the godfather, and everyone who works for me is like a son—or a daughter—you know, I’m all for chicks in the workplace. But not like incestuously. That shit ain’t right.’ He hopped off the digression and edged forward, leveling a weighty finger at Luth. “But you, Lu—you’re going to be special. I’m going to let you in on the company secrets. Not all at once, of course. But I’m gonna need a good right-

hand man to help keep my head on straight. Are you up to it?”

The tram shuddered to a stop. Boss sprang to solid ground like a circus chimp, spun and offered Luth a hand.

Diffidence persevering, he accepted it. “Um, yeah, I gue—”

“Great!” He reeled Luth into a brisk, sidelong squeeze. “Love your voice of confidence, there. Let’s get started. I’ll show you the ropes.” Boss bounced away down a flight of stairs.

Luth figured he must have jettisoned his good sense somewhere on the tram, else he never would have kept up with the capricious Genome. “Where are we going, Mister… um…”

“Mister nothing! I hate that crap. Everyone around here calls me Boss.”

“Yes, Boss…?”

He paused, sealing his lips with a thoughtful digit, and then spoke again, “Nah, wait, don’t call me Boss. That doesn’t sound right coming from you.” He studied Luth with a cocked smirk for a minute before deciding, “I guess you can call me

whatever you want, until I think of something better."

"Uh, okay… sir," Luth agreed, cordially as ever.

The smirk turned sour, but then he shrugged and pressed on. "Eh, that'll work for now. Anyway, we're going to the airship docks. You know what we do, right?"

"Yes, I've heard of Ultima Express," Luth piped up, feeling like a participant in the conversation for the first time. "It's a shipping company."

"That's right. We started out as a real small-town job, right here in Lindblum. Before anyone knew it, we were shipping packages all over the world—the fastest and the best. That was forever ago."

"Your ancestor, right?" Luth interjected, getting back to the root of his visit. "He founded this company."

Boss hummed something inscrutable and swung open a thick steel door. A cavernous room caught Luth's breath, and once he finally dared a whiff, all he could smell was motor oil, jet fuel, iron and the peculiar, wet static that always preceded storms. Stacked like bricks over their heads and across the indoor docks were dozens of airships, from sleek

and fast to massive and bulky. The ruffled sheet metal walls and I-beams resonated with shouting men and crackling tools.

Boss had been watching Luth's wide-eyed wonder with a smug grin. "Like it, rookie?"

He carefully nodded. "It's impressive, sir."

"And that's not even half the whole fleet. The rest are all over the world. We run non-stop."

Luth followed Boss's careful tread across the dew-slick catwalk, surveying each ship they passed with studious interest. "I must say, I've heard a lot about you, but I didn't know you were a Genome, sir."

"Yeah, it's a pretty well-overlooked fact." They stopped over a super-tanker that was being unloaded and refueled.

"Do you think it's because of, um, the reputation?"

Boss shot him a glare, his voice hardening. "The hell are you saying, rookie? That everyone thinks Genomes are freaks?"

"Er, no!" Luth backpedaled. "I didn't mean—of course you're not a freak, sir. I'm sorry.…Am I fired

already?”

His stern mask melted into a snicker, and then Boss was cackling outright. “Ahahahaha. You’re cute! Cute. I was just kidding. Of course we’re freaks. And don’t ever apologize around me. We all make mistakes, right?”

“Um…”

“Hey, Boss!” called a portly badger from the deck. He scaled the nearest ladder to reach Boss, standing a whole head over Luth before he finished climbing.

“Hey, Gribbo!” Unlike Luth, Boss was perfectly comfortable being dwarfed. “Gettin’ off?”

Gribbo brushed an oily glove across the front of his overalls before rubbing the remains over his nose. “Yeah,” he said with a weary grunt, “Just flew in from Daguerreo. Gonna check out for the week.”

“Awesome. Say hi to your brats for me.”

“Heh, will do.” He tipped his snout at Luth. “Hey, who’s the bumpkin?”

“You’re lookin’ at my new assistant. Meet Lu.”

Before Luth could think of protesting, more of Gribbo's grease was on his own hand and being vigorously shaken in. "Nice ta meet'chya, pal."

The Burmecian bit back a grimace. "Y-yes, the pleasure's mine…"

"Alright!" Boss clapped the badger on the back. "See ya next week, Gribbo. Me and Lu are gonna make the rounds."

Gribbo snorted as he strolled the other way. "Take it easy on the new guy, Boss!"

"Like hell I will!"

"Hahaha."

Glimpsing the disconcerted furrow to Luth's brow, Boss nudged him affably. "Lighten up, rookie. You'll have more fun here if you do."

Luth straightened his frown. "I'll keep that in mind, sir."

They left the hangars and were suddenly walking down a sterile, florescent-lit hall. Boss's bare feet left charcoal prints over the waxed tile floor. "So, you've heard a lot about me, eh? What kinds of things are they saying behind my back these days?"

“Oh, um…” Luth’s hands knotted around themselves as he fished for a polite answer, “Just people talking in taverns, little things—I’m sure half of them are pure gossip.”

“Well com’on, lay ’em on me! I want to know everything you think you know. You won’t get in trouble. Humor me.”

“Okay… They say you inherited this company from your father, just like your father did from his. Nobody knows your family’s name, though. It’s not in any public records. When your father died, there wasn’t even a funeral. They say your company keeps it a secret because of your family’s ties to underground crime.”

“The mob? Hah!” he hooted. “That’s an old one. Go on, keep going.”

“The best known connection to the company’s founder is the King of Thieves, who was a hero back during the Mist War. Ultima Express was established several years after his death, supposedly by his grandson. Oh!” Luth caught himself. “Does that mean the King of Thieves was a Genome, too?”

“Of course he was. You know, it’s amazing how people so easily forget an unpopular fact—like, say,

one of the saviors of the world being a monkey-greaser. And why not forget, since every heir to the Alexandrian throne after him has been a human. But that's history. Company secret. I hate genealogy. Now, you were saying…?"

Luth couldn't get a thought in edgewise, so he recited on, "Oh, ahm, right, the King of Thieves. Nobody remembers his real name, either. Some people say that's intentional—part of the conspiracy to cover up your company's real purpose."

"Real purpose, huh?"

"Yes, to…" Luth hesitated before the ridiculous allegation spilled out of his mouth, "…traffic illegal drugs and weapons all over Gaia."

Boss shook his head. "Man, that one never makes sense. What's that got to do with names? So, nothing new on the grapevine? I'm disappointed."

Luth started a bit. "You've heard this all before?"

"Are you kidding? That's kid's stuff. You didn't get to any of the gossip about twin clones, aliens and Black Mage armies. I've heard that we keep a secret lab in the basement where we build missiles and spaceships for the government."

“Really?”

“Yeah, I wish somebody would tell me how to get to it. I tell ya, kid, it’s hilarious. I should make a book out of ’em all.”

They passed through a block of offices—all memos and envelopes plastered over glass dividers, keyboards and coffee mugs. A dark-haired, wild-eyed, lanky man in a white-collared shirt jumped on the pair from a hidden corner. “Boss!”

While Luth was stuffing his heart back in place, Boss sauntered on. “Yo, Pat.”

Pat fired quickly, “Charles. Dave.”

“Nope,” Boss countered.

“Louise.”

“I’m not wearing a skirt, Pat.”

“Croissant?”

“Now you’re just making me hungry.”

“Damn!” Pat cursed and turned extravagantly on his heel, fleeing.

“What was that?” Luth asked, wondering if Boss had a proclivity to hire people at least as crazy as

himself.

“He was trying to guess my real name.”

“Why?”

“I said I’d give him ten million gil if he gets it right.”

Luth gaped. “And you’re letting him guess as many times as he wants??”

“I’m not worried,” Boss waved it off. “He hasn’t gotten it yet in the three years he’s been working here.”

“Sir, if I might be so bold as to ask, what *is* your real name?”

Boss stopped and faced Luth, some old, clever, secret joke behind his eflin smile. He touched a finger to his nose, and then to the tip of Luth’s muzzle. “Company secret,” was the punch line, and Luth was too bemused to laugh.

They walked on. “By the way, you said you have Freya Crescent’s diary?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Have you read it?”

“Not all the way through yet,” Luth admitted.

“Huh…” Boss scratched his chin. “Maybe you could do me a big favor about that.”

“Sure, sir…?”

“Keep the things you read in there to yourself. I don’t need to know; nobody needs to know. Privacy issues, y’know?”

He digested the odd request. “If you… say so, sir.”

Boss patted his arm roughly. “That’s a good sport.”

They reached a grand, open lobby, where streamlined stainless steel, cool marble colors, digital banners and scrolling tickers built up the impression of a fast-paced, booming company. An array of doors up front revolved around pilots, clients and visitors coming and going, up and down the escalators and through the security terminals. The setting was utterly contrary to Boss’s space on the top floor.

Boss honed in on a woman behind the front desk, looking busy with a desktop computer. He circled her office chair and perched on its back, his hands

snaking over her shoulders. “Hello, Sheryl,” he said saucily.

Sheryl was a lovely woman, Luth noted, slender yet shapely. She wore a starched business suit with a skirt cut close to her thighs. She tossed her rich purple hair around her shoulders, sat up primly in her seat and returned with playful frost, ignoring his affection, “Hello, Boss.”

Boss retreated a step and clicked his tongue. “You’re always so stiff, Sheryl. You should let me give you a proper massage one day, if you know what I mean.” He passed a wink to Luth, who shook it off, innocent and lost.

“Are you sure I’m the one who’s stiff right now?” she retorted, and then moved straight to business. “Do you want to know what’s on your schedule tonight, or are you going to continue making awkward passes until my shift ends?”

“Go on, hit me.”

“You’re having dinner with the Owlsons.”

He snapped his fingers, either for remembering or confirming, Luth couldn’t quite tell. “So I am!”

“And speaking of massages, tomorrow morning you have a hearing down at the courthouse for Miss Carawol’s sexual harassment suit.”

“Damn!” he swore lightly and turned to Luth, waving both hands for emphasis. “Tell me, Lu, what kind of sick, twisted, depraved world do we live in today, where a man can’t go to his place of work and grab his secretary’s large, supple breasts?”

“You’re a scoundrel,” Sheryl cut him down, relieving the Burmecian from answering. “This your new protégé?”

“Why, yes,” Boss gladly changed tack. “Sheryl, meet Luthane.”

Luth shook her hand, smiling pleasantly. “Nice to meet you, miss.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “Interesting name.” Then, to Boss, “I’m impressed that you remember it.”

Boss thumped his chest. “I’m sharp like a tack, Sheryl.”

“I agree, you’re a pain-in-the-ass little prick.”

“God, I love it when you talk dirty to me. Your place tonight.”

“How about no. I think you better worry more about scaring off your new pet.”

“What, Lu?” He jerked a thumb towards the Burmecian. “Nah. You’re not afraid of breasts, are ya rookie?”

While Luth’s ears burned scarlet, Boss rolled the extra name on his forgetful tongue. “Man, Carawol, Carawol… Which one was that?”

“Linda, from human resources,” Sheryl informed.

“That cunt,” he sighed wistfully. “What time?”

“Bright and early, eight o’clock.”

“Hell no. I’m sick.”

“You certainly are.”

“What’s a good plague going around, Sheryl? How’s that leprosy coming along?”

“Cured quite a long time ago, I’m afraid.”

Boss stamped a foot and twirled on it melodramatically. “Damn modern medicine! Whatever happened to those good ol’ fashioned, god-fearing diseases?” He righted himself, hands

obdurately planted on his hips. “What’s something else that’s not cured yet?”

“Syphilis.”

Boss grabbed Luth and headed out yet again, remarking, “You see why I love that woman?” Then, in parting to Sheryl, “Okay, I have the flu. But it’s bad! I could die.”

“Your funeral, sir,” she threw at his back.

“That’s the spirit.”

They scurried down to the ground floor and pressed outside, hitting the blustery city air and traffic. Boss steered Luth along the sidewalk through downtown Lindblum. The Burmecian hadn’t yet adjusted to the intense urban world, he was loath to admit. The towering, packed buildings, glaring lights, billowing smog and endless waves of automobiles and people—all in a hurry, always in a hurry—waged war with each of his senses. Hanging around Boss too much already, he was starting to wonder if he simply didn’t *think* fast enough to live in the big city.

“Are you sure it’s wise to avoid that hearing, sir?” it eventually occurred to him to ask.

“Aww, you’re concerned for my legal welfare already. I knew I picked a good partner.”

Luth blinked. “Partner…?” he tried to beg elaboration, but a poster displaying a topless woman for some establishment called ‘The Lion’s Den’ hooked his gaze. He began to reflect on the way his parents talked about “people losing their sense of shame” and “the world going to hell in a handbasket.”

“You hungry?” Boss jarred him back on track.

“Um—”

“I’m famished. You think it’s dinner time yet? We’re heading down to the Owlsons’ place. Maria makes great casseroles. The kids’ll love you, too.”

“We?”

“Yes, you, me, going to dinner. You Burmecians still eat food, right?”

For a moment, he was too overwhelmed by the notion to be offended.

Boss shook him again. “I told you, relax! Just stick by me and you’ll be cool.”

“You’re not wearing shoes, sir…” was the only objection Luth could make coherent.

“Screw ’em!” He threw up an assertive arm, pointing down the street, and proceeded in an exaggerated march. “Food first. Let’s go!”

Luth was relieved to see Boss’s antics attract a cab, and he insisted they take it before the entire street block ended up staring at them. As the taxi took off for the residential district, Luth was compelled to ask, “Don’t you have a car, sir?”

“Uh, well, I did!” Boss evasively rubbed his nose. “But then I, uh… wrecked it. A few times. Lost my license.”

“How did you do that, sir? Are you a bad driver?”

“Now that’s some question!” the Genome said peevishly, and Luth flinched.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Eh!” Boss barked, catching him, ‘No sorry’s. Anyway, the judge said I’m ‘reckless’. Hah!’ He rolled his eyes. “He has no idea.”

“Neither do I, sir,” Luth murmured, nearly to himself.

“You’ll catch on,” Boss decidedly heard him. “Besides, there’s nothing wrong with utilizing public transportation. It is efficient and provides jobs for good, hard-working men like…” He craned one leg and bunted the nameplate on the back of the driver’s seat with his heel. “STAN, there.”

Behind the pane of safety glass partitioning the cab, STAN grunted.

They stopped in a cluttered neighborhood at the base of the mountain city. Townhouses were stacked like toy blocks along a twisted, narrow street, where children and airing laundry played through the mess. It was quaint, poor and dirty, but oddly… wholesome, in Luth’s eyes. For the first time since arriving in Lindblum, he felt close to home.

Luth should have guessed that the Owlson family was comprised of owls, but he didn’t, so the surprise was there. He was greeted enthusiastically at the door and pulled into a sticky, crowded apartment that smelled of sweaty kids and fresh bread.

He let his gaze get sucked into the faded lime green wallpaper while Maria Owlson bustled about the supper table, arranging pots, bowls and silverware around her offspring and guests. Luth was seated next to Boss, across from the hostess’s

little son and daughter, Joel and Cindy. They stared over duck-shaped sippy-cups at their visitors with brazen curiosity and wariness at once.

Maria took her place at the head of the table with a hearty harrumph. “My husband is staying up late at the shop tonight. Poor soul’s going to work himself to death, I say. But you boys are free to eat up all his portion.”

Luth nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Owlson.”

“It’s my pleasure.” She chuckled amiably and fanned her bowl of hot soup with a wing-like mitt. ‘Boss, you’re terrible,’ she chided the Genome. “You haven’t told me a thing about your new friend, here.”

Boss shrugged, giving Luth half a glance. “I think he can speak for himself. Go on, tell us about yourself, Lu.”

“Oh, well…” He fumbled with his fork. “There’s not much to say. I grew up in Burmecia. I just arrived here a week ago.”

“Burmecia!” Maria chirped. “I hear it’s a beautiful country. I want to visit someday.”

“It’s very nice, ma’am. I was training in the royal palace to become a Dragon Knight.”

“A Dragon Knight! Oh my goodness, that’s so exotic.”

“Do Dragon Knights really slay dragons?” Cindy piped up.

“Traditionally, yes,” Luth answered academically. “An old initiation rite for a Dragon Knight was to leave Burmecia on what’s called a Pilgrimage. At the end of the Pilgrimage, he would have to hunt and kill a grand dragon.”

Maria’s excitable commentary was the loudest thing in the room. “Sounds dangerous! If I ever saw a grand dragon, I’d about wet my britches, never mind fighting it! Ohoho!”

Boss prodded him. “You’re on your Pilgrimage now, aren’t you, Lu?”

“I am, actually.”

“Oh good heavens.” Maria put aside her soup to fan herself, now. “You’re not really going to go kill a grand dragon, are you, son?”

Luth put the flustered woman at ease. “I don’t think there are that many left anyway, ma’am. Grand

dragons are endangered on this continent."

"A good thing!" she cawed. "We don't need dangerous monsters like that around anymore. You know, I think I saw something on the Informative Channel once about Dragon Knights. They're so noble! They say one of the eight heroes of the Mist War was a Dragon Knight."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, that was my great-great-great grandmother."

"Really!" She slapped the countertop, and the little ones jumped. "You listen up, children. We have another celebrity at the table."

Luth's cheeks bunched up with a blush. "Oh, I'm not…"

"Hahahah," Boss ribbed him, "What's wrong, Lu, embarrassed? Your ears are turnin' red."

"Sir…!" he whispered harshly, pleading for his modesty.

Maria waved a spoon at them both. "Psh, don't you let Boss sass you. He's just a big troublemaker."

"And proud of it," Boss quipped around a mouthful of potatoes.

“I’ll tell you a story, though.” Maria leaned over the pan of green bean casserole to confide openly with Luth. ‘My husband and I were in deep trouble with some loan crocs. They were going to take our store if we didn’t come up with 3,200 gil overnight! Our little potion shop is all we have.’ A thick primary feather was aimed at Boss. “But then that fine man right there bailed us out. If it weren’t for him, oh my goodness, I don’t know where we’d be. I don’t care what they say about Genomes; your boss is a good man. And we’re going to pay him back!”

“Aww,” Boss brushed the tall praise off, “Cut it out, Maria. I told you guys it’s nothing. You’re going to ruin my dinner if you keep talking all that sap.”

“Ohoho, *you*,” she chortled. “Are the mashed potatoes all right? I was worried I didn’t cook them enough.”

“They’re great! I’m hungry enough to lick the bowl clean.” Boss didn’t hesitate to demonstrate his point, and Luth couldn’t conceal a grimace next to him.

Abruptly, from the peanut gallery, “I heard Genomes eat babies.”

“Joel!” Maria snapped.

“Tha’s not it!” Cindy corrected. “They sacrifice babies, for their falth god.”

“Both of you mind your mouths right now! That’s all a lot of gossip and terrible lies.”

“Your mother’s right,” Boss agreed, adopting the first straight face Luth had seen since they met. “We don’t sacrifice babies…” Luth knew it was too good to be true when a devilish grin cut up his ruse. “They’re way too small. We much prefer growing little kids…!”

“Eeee!” The children were shrieking and tumbling towards the stairs by the time Boss was out of his whicker-chair and after them. The three crashed somewhere on the second floor with a thump that shook the rickety foundation.

Luth was left abashed in his seat, not sure whether to apologize or ignore the horseplay. Maria merely shook her head as giggles trickled through the thin walls. “They are all *too much*, I swear to goodness.”

“Where are you staying?”

After dinner, Luth and Boss were trekking back towards the neon-lit urban center, spindly streetlights and distant skyscrapers their only beacons. The residential district was a quiet realm after dark, eerie yet peaceful.

“Oh.” Luth idly dug around his backpack, reassuring himself of his meager possessions. A man on a Pilgrimage wasn’t to afford himself a lot of luggage; it was unnecessary on top of impractical. “I have a motel room in the business district.”

Boss wrinkled his nose with disapproval. “Forget that. Catch.”

Luth nimbly snatched the key ring that flew from Boss’s pocket. “What’s this?”

“My keycard. Top floor, you know, where my office is? Go down that hall and hang a right. Second door on the right. It’s all yours.”

“Oh, I, but…” Luth was again struck dumb by the generous offer. “Won’t you need this key, sir?”

He shrugged blithely. “Nah, just hold on to it until Sheryl has your card ready.” Before Luth even realized he was leaving, Boss slipped into a shadowed niche across the street. “I’ll see ya tomorrow, rookie!”

“Uh, where are you going, sir?” he futilely called after him.

“Wherever!” the moonless twilight answered.

“Oh. When should I report in, sir?”

“Whenever!”

3. Work Hard

3. Work Hard

Luth was miffed for a while over being abandoned on the streets, but the long walk downtown cooled his touchy heart and gave his mind a chance to catch up with his rushed day.

He thought about how and when he might (or if he even should) resume his Pilgrimage, considering his sudden, unsolicited employment. He was already homesick, albeit in strange ways. The Owlsons' neighborhood was not unlike where he grew up—in fact, it was the only thing about Lindblum Luth could relate to. Not even the dark was the same. In Burmecia, when the rain clouds spared a night, Luth could lose count of the stars, so many constellations freckling a blushing blue firmament. In Lindblum, the night sky was haze-shrouded and glowed a dull orange, presumably from the flames of the refineries in the industrial district. The garish lights and signs of the rest of the city would have paled any view of the heavens, besides.

The moons, at least, were a constant. The blue crescent had cut a fair swath in the smoggy sky by

the time Luth found his motel, checked out and navigated back to Ultima Express's central branch. The lobby was open, though Sheryl wasn't there. He politely explained his situation to the night receptionist, who helped him through the security stiles, his knight's halberd strapped to his back and all.

Even at the late hour, though the evening traffic had thinned, the halls were steeped in far, wide, wavering echoes, like the thrum of an everlasting rain. The occasional buggy laden with parcels squeaked by, and straggler pilots were loitering around an indoor café, waiting for their next flight.

Too tired to wander and mingle, Luth left behind the main floor and took the private lift to the top. He was ejected into the same tranquil, carpet-muffled corridor from whence his afternoon had spiraled out of control. As he followed Boss's directions to his quarters, he wondered what sort of room the wily man had gifted him. Given the eclectic tour he had been dragged along, he would not have been surprised to open the door to a kennel or an arcade.

The simple lock gave way, and Luth slipped into the dark, fumbling for a light switch.

A pair of gentle beige lamps welcomed him. There were no dogs and no slot machines. There *was* a queen-sized bed, a flat-screen television pinned to the wall, a minibar, a bathroom with a standing shower, and a pair of sliding glass doors leading to the balcony. The room felt clean and calm, washed in dull greys and reds. It was all so orderly, so… *ready*, it could not have looked more like a hotel if a mint had been left on the pillow.

He dumped his pack into a reclining chair, lay his halberd over it and fell face-first onto the bed, exhaustion finally kicking him down. It wasn't the kind of tired he felt after a long day on the road, with aching feet and a sore back—it was some funny weariness of the head, a sensation new and strange to him. He wondered if this would be the first of many nights to get to know that feeling.

He spied the lint-bunnies on the bedding and the sheer layer of dust on the nightstand, and wondered as well if he was the first person to occupy this room in ages.

That was the last trifle on his mind before he dozed off.

He didn’t stir until a slit of sunlight broke in through the balcony, thawing out the last of the morning. He flexed over the bed, still too comfortable to get up. Then he saw the clock on the table reading 9:34 in jagged red bars and scrambled to his feet.

Luth mumbled rebukes at himself for sleeping in (even if Boss wasn’t very explicit about what time his day started) and stepped into the bathroom for a quick wash. He brushed his teeth, combed his limp brown hair out of his green eyes, frowned at his old, wrinkled clothes, sniffed them thoroughly before deciding they were fit to wear out again, made a mental note to find a nearby launderette, picked a small box of apple juice out of the minibar (after checking its expiration date, just to be safe) and drank a quick breakfast before wandering outside.

He caught a buxom young rabbit woman emerging from two doors down the hall. She giggled, her whiskers twirling around her button nose, and waved at him before adjusting her purse and miniskirt and trotting to the elevator on shiny platform shoes. Luth didn’t remember his “hello” until she was already gone.

Curious, he approached the room she left and held an ear to the closed door. Silence. He didn't pursue the intrigue and looked for Boss's office instead. It was on the opposite end of the floor, as he remembered correctly. Luth knocked once after testing the room's sound—he could hear faint scratching and the rustle of paper.

"Come in," Boss's voice called.

Luth stuck his head inside. He found his employer at his desk over a pile of envelopes, a pen in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The window was cracked, letting the smoke seep out and a lofty vacuum-drone of city noise seep in.

"Hey Lu," he greeted cheerfully. "Come on in. Sleep well?"

"Yes sir, thank you." Luth closed the door behind him, sank his toes into the fur rug (Burmecians, like many demis, tended not to wear shoes, finding them restrictive. Ankle bracers and sandals were common substitutes), and stood by, itching for a task. "Anything I can do, sir?"

The Genome looked up from a sleeve of stamps he was licking. "Hmm? Oh, I've got this, thanks. Oh!" He abruptly snapped his fingers at the

entertainment center over Luth's shoulder. "You see over there? I just got Super Speeder XD for my Gamebox. I haven't given it a test run yet. Wanna fire it up?"

Luth glanced apprehensively into the corner. "Uh… I'm afraid I'm not very good at things like that, sir."

Boss's eyebrows knitted together incredulously. "What? What kind of man are you?"

"A man who doesn't play video games, sir," he admitted plainly.

"That's it." He snapped his fingers again, resolved. "You're sitting down right there and playing Super Speeder XD. That's an order."

Luth slowly registered the strange command. "… Okay, sir…"

Boss resumed his paperwork while his subordinate fumbled with the pile of cables and game discs on the floor. When Luth turned on the TV, a smartly dressed woman popped on screen.

"Today a new wing to South Gate Memorial Hospital is being opened," spoke the newscaster, "Thanks in part to generous donations from both the

Lindbluman National Health Foundation and the CEO of Ultima Express…”

Luth started a little. “Wow, sir. You did that?”

“Did what?” Boss glimpsed the building pictured on television. “Oh, that hospital. Good, they finally got that wing up. They were needing a new burn ward like crazy. I had to give ’em a little push to make it happen.”

“That was very altruistic of you, sir.”

He shrugged, sinking back to his writing. “Eh, it’s nothin’.”

The news continued, “…was going to be named after him, but he respectfully declined.”

Luth frowned a tick. “You should’ve let them name the building after you, sir. At least the family name. It would’ve been an honor.”

“You know why I couldn’t do that.”

“It’s a ‘company secret,’ sir?” he guessed.

“You’re catching on, kid.” He spun a finger at the idle Gamebox. “Now less news, more game.”

Luth had finally set everything up and was racing for fifth place on the Ice Slopes when Sheryl gracefully barged into the office.

“Hi Miss Sheryl,” Luth said distractedly from the floor, eyes glued to the TV lest he fall into sixth place.

Sheryl blinked at him once before snorting at Boss. “Working him hard already, I see.”

Luth could practically hear Boss’s wayward grin. “Of course. What’s up?”

She slapped a notebook onto his desk. “Homework, just for you.”

“You always bring me the best gifts, sensei,” Boss facetiously remarked.

“Also, one of your scumbag friends is here to see you.”

“Which scumbag?”

“Greasy Ricky.”

“Man. Probably wants more money. Let him up.”

Sheryl left, leaving Luth anxious over the guest he was about to meet; “scumbag” and “greasy”

weren’t the sort of labels that inspired good faith.

“Should I leave, sir?” he wondered for their privacy.

Boss waved him down. “Nah, you’re cool. Keep playing your game and don’t mind us.”

An energetic figure cut into the room moments later. Luth cast him half a glance, but everything about his build and garb was too slight and dull to hold his eye for long. His hair was slicked back as with tar, and his tone was high and noisy.

“’ey, Boss!”

“Hey, Ricky.” Boss rose and moved around to sit on the front of his desk. He offered his visitor a cigarette.

“Yeah yeah, thanks.” He took the lighter that followed it and made himself comfortable while Boss stoked the conversation.

“What’s new?”

“Same old, same old.” A leery squint fell on Luth’s back. “Who’s the rat?”

“He’s my new guy. Don’t worry about him.”

Ricky shook his head. “Alright. Listen man, I had fifteen feather dusters coming in from Gnomarbor, on Maxiclean Inc. through Dalishire.”

“Okay…” Boss drawled.

“But I only picked up ten at the drop! I don’t know where the hell the other five went.”

“When did they come in?”

“Last night. I don’t wanna say your guys were in it, but I’ve gotta come up with somethin’ or Leo’s gonna skin me and nail my dick to his front door. This is the third time this has happened.”

“I dunno what to tell you. If this is the third time, you might have a leak on the inside.”

“Fuck me,” Ricky spat. “I wonder if it’s Pevy. He’s been trying to nose in on my route for a while.”

“Pevy’s a twat,” Boss muttered through cupped hands as he lit another smoke.

“Yeah. There’s nothin’ you can do, though? You can’t check around for me?”

“I can check the station here, but that’s about it.”

“Man, you know what would work, though. About twelve grand—”

Boss’s palms dropped heavily to the desktop as he rolled his eyes. “Fucking Christ…”

“—just to cover the five until I find ’em!”

“See, Lu?” Boss said pointedly, “This is about money.”

Luth thankfully didn’t have room to say, “Um…” before Ricky mowed over him, pleading through casual desperation, “I told you, man, my dick is on the line. Please, think of my dick. Think of my poor dick.”

“That’s nasty. Look, I’ll give you five if I can *stop* thinking of your gonads.”

“Five? That’s not even half. Com’on, be a friend.”

“I am a friend! A friend you already owe seven grand.”

“Shit,” Ricky relented. “Alright, alright man. You’re the boss. Five’s cool. Meet you under town tonight?”

“Yeah. I think I’ll be taking it to The Pen. Look for me there.”

“Cool, cool.” Ricky wove his way to the door. “Hells of thanks, man. Good luck.”

“You know I won’t need it. Take it easy, Ricky.”

“See ya.” He vanished with a hasty slam.

Once it felt safe, Luth set the game controller down and carefully asked, “That was a friend of yours, sir?”

Boss smirked and folded his arms. “Eh, sorta. He’s more like a business friend.”

“He seemed awfully concerned about his feather dusters, sir.”

A baffled expression met Luth’s innocent remark, a second before Boss broke down into roaring laughter. Luth stared dumbstruck at the overreaction while Boss tumbled over his paperwork in a fit.

“Um… sir…?” Luth probed uneasily.

Boss eventually reclaimed his bearings and squished his cigarette before the desk went up in flames. “Yeah…” he sighed, wiping a tear from his eye. “Yeah, he did.”

He snapped to his feet, motioning towards the door. “Hell, rookie, let’s head down to the bay. Maybe we’ll find ’em for him.”

Luth propped his feet on a pillow and reclined in bed, enjoying the easy throb of blood in his relieved soles.

He spent a long afternoon on the docks, learning the grittier points of the shipping industry. Unloading crates, driving trucks, pushing carts, stamping trunks, writing labels, tagging bags, redirecting traffic, taxiing ships—he had done a little bit of everything with Boss at his side, explaining where things went and why. His nails were scuffed, his back was sore and fresh blisters bloomed in places his halberd never scratched. It was a step apart from his knight’s training, which was certainly tough, but not nearly as hectic. It would take Luth a while to adjust to this new breed of stress. Boss assured him that they wouldn’t spend much time on the field like that; he just wanted to acquaint Luth with the basics.

Nonetheless, it was a very fulfilling day of grunt work. Luth was satisfied when Boss dismissed him

for supper and then dropped off to parts unknown. Boss was good at disappearing, Luth noticed.

He used his spare change to buy some stuffed rolls and biscuits from the café in the lobby, and then returned to his room for a shower and rest. Now clean, refreshed and wrapped in a soft robe he found in the closet, he drank in the quiet evening and waited for his hair to dry.

His lazy focus settled on the worn leather bindings peeking out of his knapsack. In all the frenzy of his new job, he'd nearly forgotten the artifact he stowed away, and the moment of peace was perfect for catching up on his reading. He pulled out his ancestor's diary and thumbed to the last page he could recall.

It wasn't a diary, really—the first part, anyway. It opened with memoirs, particularly surrounding the Mist War and the writer's (amazingly prominent) role in it. The entries eventually digressed into a journal, if a rather sweeping one, taking the later years of her life one highlight at a time.

It was a fascinating read at any rate, and Luth wondered why none of his family had considered getting it published before.

We followed the Black Mages and were teleported to the Red Rose, Alexandria's flagship. We were fortunate to have boarded undetected, but we were too late to stop Brahne. With Kuja's help and the power of the Desert Star, Brahne summoned Odin, the great eidolon of death, to wreak doom on the surviving Cleyrans.

The demon tore out of the heavens as from the lakes of hell, galloping across burning clouds on an ironclad steed. A single thrust of Odin's lance shattered the settlement. The cathedral, the town, the majestic tree itself—all were rent asunder in seconds. The rising cloud of smoke and thunder eclipsed the sun. I watched from the deck of the Red Rose, but could not move. I could not speak. I felt the last shred of my heart crumble to ashes at the bottom of Cleyra's trunk. I had failed my people—and myself—for the last time.

So engrossed was Luth in the tale that he nearly missed the rapping on the door.

He jumped and rearranged himself appropriately. "Come in."

A straw-mopped head poked through the door. "Hey Lu. Bad time?"

Oddly prompted, Luth surveyed his own room. The clock showed 9:30, to his surprise; apparently he'd been reading for hours. "Hello, sir. No, you can come in."

Boss entered and likewise swept a glance around, rolling his shoulders restlessly. "I like what you've done with the place."

"I haven't done any—" Luth started when Boss scooped up the halberd by the door.

"Whoa, nice." He swung it around experimentally, almost knocking over a lamp. "This yours?"

"Yes, sir," Luth said, not elaborating. He trained a wary eye on the weapon's volatile path.

Boss held it still, admiring the blade crafted into a dragon's wing. "You don't see things like this anymore." Putting it aside, his gaze roamed to the book in Luth's lap. "So, what'chya got, there? Reading a bedtime story?"

"Not quite." Luth chuckled faintly as he skimmed the next thirty pages. "I will tell you this about my great-great-great-grandmother: she was very… verbose."

Boss closed the thought with a swipe of a hand. “Say no more. Hey, you wanna hit the town with me?”

The sandy fur of his brow tangled over the idea. “This late, sir? What for?”

“Gonna take care of some business. You like boxing?”

One of the Burmecian’s ears swiveled considerately. “I like it okay, sir,” he replied openly enough, barely perturbed by the segue.

“You might like this, then. Want to go with? I’m heading out in a minute.”

“Well, um…” He glanced from the diary, to the door, to his boss rocking eagerly on the balls of his feet (he was wearing sneakers, so he looked serious about going out. Well, as serious as he could.) “Okay, sir. Just let me get ready.”

The cab left them on the flimsy border between districts. Boss skipped down the dark sidewalk into deeper, darker sidewalk, tugging Luth along with all the crafty, subdued enthusiasm of an urchin leading fellow children into trespassing.

Before long they were stalking through the shadow of a boarded-up warehouse, alone save the rats that puddled through the alley.

Disconcerted by the deviations left and right, Luth asked, “What’s down here, sir?”

Boss stooped over a manhole cover. “Ever been to Gatortown, kid?”

“Gatortown? What’s that?”

He popped the heavy lid with a clang, dragging open a drainage tunnel. “You know, Lindblum underground. Don Gator’s turf.”

Luth’s ears perked with recognition, and then flattened with alarm. “You mean Don Gator the *mobster*?”

Boss brushed his greasy hands on his jeans and flippantly indicated the ladder dropping into the dank, pitch unknown. “This’ll be your first time, then?”

“*What?!*”

4. Play Hard

4. Play Hard

Luth had heard of Lindblum's underground—anyone who'd seen even a lousy gangster movie was familiar with it. It wasn't a fictional concept, either; the public generally accepted the existence of "the mob" as it has been for untold decades.

What most people, Luth included, didn't realize was that Lindblum's underground was more than an organization of crooks or a black market—it was not just an idea, it was a *place*, and it actually was underground.

That was precisely what Boss was explaining as they descended into the utility tunnels around Lindblum's sewers.

"They used to just call this place Undertown."

The ladder dropped out, and suddenly Luth was marching down a long corridor of bad water and bad lighting between slimy cobbles and stinky rats. The lame orange lights were like embalmed torches in rotting catacombs—like the dead orange sky outside. Luth stepped carefully around inky shadows

in the bricks, trying not to stick his toes where cockroaches sleep.

Boss's easy voice rang over the gurgling sewage and twittering vermin. "Then Gator's family took over and it got renamed. That was a long time ago. This place has been Gator territory for generations."

They turned into a black culvert that ran too far for Luth's nerves. He began to dread every next step into unseen cobwebs, but at least he managed to swallow any squeals or complaints. A real Dragon Knight wouldn't shy from dark corners, he counseled himself.

He could barely discern Boss's white sneakers plodding straight ahead, no care in the world. A caged yelp escaped Luth when something soft and slender coiled around his wrist.

"Haha, relax Lu, it's just me." The tail squeezed gently; it was more firm and weighty than Luth realized. "Hold on through this part, okay? It's a little slippery."

Luth tucked his stomach back in place and clutched the fuzzy guideline. The pair navigated a steep bank awash with what Luth didn't want to

believe was urban waste, especially as it soaked through his leather anklets and into the fur.

Finally the path evened and light broke the tunnel. They stepped out into a high-domed plaza that was rich with more color, sound and even odor than Luth ever dreamed of finding in a ditch.

Wiry lanterns were strung across the short-stacked alleys, leaping from rickety rooftops to giant pipes jutting out of the manmade cliffs. Shacks and sheds were nestled under ruined archways and clumsy steel rigging. People roamed the shifty streets like packs of dogs, their riotous barks and the crack of metal bubbling through the echoes of curses. There were lampposts with busted glass cases and park benches with grizzled old men sprawled over them and pigeons fighting with rats for perches on overturned cars. There was an open market—little striped tents and everything—peddling apples and pears next to suspicious potions and powders. A palpable haze crept out of broken taverns where cloaked figures smoked, drank and spat at each other under neon beer logos. The seamy infrastructure was dyed in rusty, dark hues, and the scents of tobacco, motor exhaust, alcohol, mildew and urine singed Luth’s nostrils.

There were no children, no pretty little houses, no picket fences—nothing clean, nothing smartly dressed, and nothing polite. It was a true, crude suburbia—a city under the city—a mirror image of Lindblum as seen through a greasy puddle.

Boss drew a hazardously deep breath and announced, “Welcome to Gatortown,” with a flourish. “There’s no cops, no curfew, no drinking age—the only law here is the Don’s. It’s right off the edge of civilization. Oh, I’d watch your purse there, if I were you.”

Luth prudently trained a hand to the strap of his pack as he followed Boss to the opposite end of town, where people were congregating around a fenced arena. They shuffled into some vague queue in front of a ticket booth.

While they were gradually packed deeper into the waiting throng, Luth dared to ask, “So what are we doing here, sir?”

“You remember Ricky stopping by earlier? Remember how I said I’d loan him five thousand gil?”

“Yes…” he reluctantly recalled.

“Well, I don’t exactly have that kind of change on hand.”

“Then why did you say you’d give it to him, sir?”

“Ah, well.” Boss rolled his shoulders in a shrug. “I just fibbed a bit. I do have the money, but I’d rather win it here than take it out of my pocket. You might say I’m a cheap bastard, but I just think this way is more, eh…” A sly grin sprouted as he dug up the best term. “Sporting.”

“Win?” Luth blinked at the shady stadium beyond the ticket gate. “You’re not considering gambling, are you sir?”

Boss chuckled. “This is gonna be much more fun than gambling, rookie.”

A dog-faced senior met them at the head of the line. “Entry fee is 50 gi—” He stopped and stuck his nose out the ticket window to peer down his bifocals at Boss. “Oh, Ultima. Long time no see.”

Boss rested an elbow on the booth’s ledge. “Hey Arty. Yeah, been a while.”

“Going to get in The Pen tonight?”

“Sure am.”

Luth stood aside, absorbing his environment. He was now close enough to see through the fences, spying a boxy, spotlit enclosure at the pit of tightly tiered benches. People were slowly filling the seats and passing coins and drinks under the low ceiling and dim lights.

“What’s your prize?”

“Five thou this time.”

“You know, Don hates when you do this,” Arty commented as he began to file a ticket. “Says it’s bad for business.”

Boss rolled his eyes. “Oh com’on, it’s not like I come down here *that* much. He’ll get over it.”

Luth was just thinking that it all looked like a boxing ring when he at last registered the sign above the front door.

THE PEN

NEW BRAWLERS WELCOME — PLACE BETS AT THE DOOR

NO SHIRT — NO SHOES — NO GLOVES — NO PROBLEM

Boss nudged him. “Hey Lu, want me to sign you up, too?”

The Burmecian snapped out of his discovery, glancing around frantically. “Uh, what, this—this is real fighting!”

Boss stared flatly at him. “Glad you could join us, rookie. You want to sign up or not? If you beat me, I’ll let you keep the five grand,” he offered adventurously.

“What?” Luth gagged on alarm. “No! No thanks, really, sir.”

Boss shrugged the rejection off. “Oh well, suit yourself.”

Arty finished Boss’s pass and handed it down. “Here you go. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Arty!” Boss waved as he skipped away.

Luth tailed him through the gates and around the surly-looking bouncers. “Sir! Isn’t this—this is—I don’t know what this is called, but I’m pretty sure it’s illegal! And dangerous!”

“What are you worried about, Lu? This is Gatortown, remember? This kinda stuff is the norm.”

Luth wrung one ear nervously. “So you’ve done this before, sir?”

“Plenty of times. Nothing makes you feel more alive than a good old manly beat-down,” he declared louder than necessary.

“If you say so, sir…” he quietly acquiesced, failing against Boss’s leisurely confidence.

Boss stopped him at the bottom of the bleachers. “I’m heading to the lockers. Gotta get ready. Go ahead and find a seat if you want to watch. If you see Ricky, tell him where I went, okay?”

Luth scanned the rows for a vacant spot, trying his best to comply. “Okay, sir. Please be careful.”

“Don’t worry!” And Boss was out of sight.

Hardly knowing what else to do among such an unsavory lot, Luth parked reasonably out-of-the-way and waited for the spectacle in the ring to unfold. A girl with a tray of beer paused in front of him, and he was too thirsty to resist a mug, even if he didn’t trust beverages in these parts too much.

“The Pen” was aptly named; it looked like an oversized chocobo coop. A lone strobe lamp beamed through the honeycomb wire that enclosed the ring

on all sides. Sawdust and litter sprinkled the otherwise barren floor.

The first man in a suit Luth had seen all night entered The Pen, screamed some extravagant welcome to the audience, and then stepped clear for the competitors.

This wouldn't be Luth's first taste of violence. He was training to be a Dragon Knight, after all, and sometimes Burmecia Palace's sparring grounds got a little bloody.

Bare-knuckle boxing, as Gatortown made sport of it, was a slightly different animal. Blood and bruises were closer to the point than skill and pride. The raucous crowd cheered and booed at the bat of an eye, every deadly swing a turning point. Luth could barely see the fights for all the bouncing spectators (he nearly spilled his beer thanks to the boorish gentleman to his right).

He watched a huge black panther throw down a bald white human and a woman wearing feathers and muu skins break a dwarf's jaw before Boss appeared in the ring, opposite an extremely corpulent man.

Boss was a strange sight on the floor, pacing like a tiny tiger around his opponent, tail thrashing around his ankles. Shirt and shoes discarded, Luth could see the garden of scars along his spine, across his chest and down his arms. His wrists were wrapped in cloth bandages. A faded red tribal eagle stamped his back, its wings cresting his shoulders. He looked lean and fit, but terribly small altogether.

The crowd received “Boss Ultima” oddly enough, with an even mix of jubilance, rabid outrage and Genome-oriented slurs.

Luth slipped to the edge of his seat, anxious on his employer’s behalf. His opponent was a wide-set hulk who carried his flab like armor, and once the match started all that meat flowed through his arms like sledgehammers.

Boss cartwheeled out of the initial attack and tested a punch on the fat man’s flank, which yielded flabby nothing. The human tank guffawed and spun into a frenzy, tossing his girth into all The Pen’s corners, but Boss danced around the bulk like a child on a trampoline. The giant kept throwing slow, futile fists at an impossibly nimble target.

The match dragged on for an appalling while, until Boss’s opponent broke into a panting fit, soggy

and pathetic. It was then that Boss pounced, pouring a flurry of blows over the man's ears until he fell with a mighty thump. Boss bounced off his prone belly in a victorious somersault, and the crowd roared a spectrum of profanities.

Luth sat back and contemplated the score while two more unknown brawlers scuffled in The Pen. He was impressed and relieved that Boss's aplomb wasn't unfounded. Luth had met his fair share of soldiers back home, and knew how to pick a skilled warrior out of a rabble—Boss was looking to fit more with the former. His technique was easy enough to read: Boss used speed and endurance to compensate for his lack of size and strength. Avoiding direct hits and outlasting his opponent were his keys to success. Luth only worried about what would happen if Boss met someone too quick and strong for his game…

The small tournament wound down to the finals, and by the time Boss faced the last challenger Luth was almost as excited as his fellow spectators.

The opponent was introduced as "The Black Griffin," and he was no less intimidating than the others, if the most freakish: too much muscle on a lanky frame, pale skin shaded blue, a black spiked

mohawk, silver rings piercing his ears, navel and lip, dark camouflage pants, and a soaring griffin tattoo across his sinewy back as a matter of course. His face was long and jagged, dark eyes ever-glaring.

Luth's pricked ears could narrowly pick the sneer from his mouth. "We meet again, Ultima."

Boss's feral pacing fell into a relaxed saunter as he snickered. "Hey Griff. You're looking well."

Griffin flexed his oversized hands. "Cut the chit-chat. I'm here to beat you."

Boss straightened, crossing his arms defiantly. "I hope you won't take it personally when I stomp you, then. I'm here on business."

"We'll see about that," Griffin growled, stooping into a monk's broad-bowed stance.

Luth couldn't tell who moved first. They lunged at each other and all at once the arena was in an uproar. To the Burmecian's chagrin, Griffin was a match for Boss's swift moves, thwarting every bold reach and long step with a strong arm or heavy hand. The larger man was surprisingly agile for his build, bouncing off the quivering chocobo-fence with purposeful grace. He didn't afford Boss room to breathe, and the Genome couldn't spare his guard.

It was a blurry stalemate for a long minute, until Boss lent his weight to one palm, throwing his legs up for a kick to the gut. Griffin caught him by the shins with one hand and shot the other deep under Boss's ribs, launching the little body across the ring.

Boss crashed in a sputtering heap, dust clinging to his sweat-sticky skin and hair like paint. Griffin stood smugly while the Genome coughed up a wad of red phlegm and climbed to his feet.

"Heh!" Boss cracked, wiping the blood off a mad grin. "You've gotten better!"

Griffin responded with a low swipe, and Boss returned to the fight.

Luth heard himself shouting encouragements he couldn't attest to later, spun up in the energy of the match and its followers. The fighters were fast—almost too fast for simple eyes to follow, but there was no fury, no fire. It was too-big arms and black-and-blue competing for the upper hand against spindly quick limbs, liquid gold—it was a spider monkey scrambling around an orangutan—it was serious child's play.

Griffin's patience wore thin before his stamina, and he drove Boss to a wall with a surge of attacks.

The crowd balanced on toes and a wave of held breath, anticipating the end. Nowhere left to go but up, Boss leapt and aimed high, and Griffin was ready to snare him by the neck, crushing his flight.

A rush of air and denim brushed over his thick fingers. Boss was gone, up and then up again, and Griffin noticed the monkey tail propelling him off the fence's links too late to stop the heel sailing into his nose. Griffin's head violently snapped back, and his body followed in apparent slow motion until everything thundered to the floor. Boss stepped off his face and—just as Griffin was lashing vengefully forward—pivoted sharply, sweeping his knuckles under Griffin's rising chin.

The Black Griffin flopped to his side with a sick crack and lay still, a disoriented, savage grumbling spilling from his sore throat.

"Gonna stay down?" Boss challenged, and in retort Griffin spit out a crushed tooth.

Luth abandoned his drink and pushed his way down the stands to meet the victor while the announcer sang the conclusion of the tournament and the crowd hissed and hurrahed over their wagers. He'd nearly been squashed and trampled

threefold by the time he found Boss emerging from the lockers, wiggling into his oversized shirt.

“Sir!” Luth clung to his sleeve lest the flock separate them again. “Sir, I’m glad you did well.”

“Hey, Lu!” The Burmecian’s mistaken affection was repaid with a loose hug. “Did you watch? That was total fun—you should’ve got in this time. Did you find Ricky?”

On cue, Greasy Ricky jumped the two from behind. “Holy shit, there’s our champion!”

Luth carefully recoiled while Boss exchanged a high-five with the drop-in. “Holy shit, there’s our favorite bastard!”

Ricky laughed roughly and jabbed Boss in the arm. “I’d rather be a lucky bastard than a favorite! That was a helluva fight, man. You aced Black Griffin flat. Bam!” He pantomimed the winning uppercut. “Holy shit. How’s that prize money lookin’?”

“Not subtle at all, are ya, Ricky?” Boss fished a wad of bills from his wallet, handing his winnings off. “Don’t spend it all in one place.”

“Ahaha! You’re the man, Boss. You’re totally getting this back. Hell, let’s go for some victory drinks. It’ll be on me.”

“Drinks, eh?” Boss’s gaze lingered on the weary dread in Luth’s eyes before he said with a tired edge, “Nah, that’s okay, I’ll take you up on it later. I need to head topside.”

“Heh, chickening out? Griffin musta hit you harder than I thought! Haha!” Ricky cuffed his back. “Oh well, see ya.” He then bolted off, in a hurry with or without Boss.

“Are we leaving now, sir?” Luth enquired, trying not to sound too eager about it. He’d taken a big enough draught of Gatortown for one sitting.

“Yeah, we should. I’m a little worn ou—woah,” Boss huffed, stumbling over a step, and Luth reflexively caught him under the arm.

“I’m okay, Lu,” he assured breathlessly, leaning more on his aide than pride would admit. “Let’s go home, okay?”

Luth nodded and led the way to the exit. “Of course, sir.”

5. After Hours

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Two months later, he still hadn’t finished reading Freya Crescent’s diary.

He took in scraps at a time, usually before bed. He learned the full name of the King of Thieves, something no history book would divulge, and swallowed it, never knowing how to bring it up against permission. Boss neither spoke nor listened of his family history, and especially the Mist War, which was unfortunately where Luth’s curiosities were rooted.

He didn’t have to probe; all the facts were already in his hands, just as Boss told him. His real dilemma, the one that fettered his spirit to a dead Pilgrimage in a world that had outgrown it, was that he didn’t really know what he was looking for. He was digging for answers to unborn questions, things he couldn’t ask and, from the impression Boss was giving, shouldn’t.

Eventually, after turning too many slow pages in his quiet, neat apartment, he forewent the unspoken

hows and the written whats and whens and festered on the only question left:

Why did he come here?

Though he couldn't figure out what he was doing with his life, Boss kept him too busy to dwell on it during the day. The Genome was right about one thing: Luth got to travel. Quite a lot. Ultima Express was a fast track to anywhere in the world.

Luth wasn't sure about his job description, either- if he had one. He accompanied Boss to locations far, wide and exotic, for both business and leisure, but since Boss always handled the former, Luth felt more on tour than at service. Sometimes, when deliveries necessitated hiking through the more outlandish parts of Gaia (such as the time they carried a birthday cake from one Qu's Marsh on Eunorus Plains to another on Lanar Island, half-way across the world and through the sweatiest bogs imaginable), Boss would call on Luth's halberd to fend off monsters, and then he felt more like a bodyguard than an assistant. Although, considering Boss's performance in The Pen, Luth wondered if he needed even that.

More than anything, Luth was suspecting, he was just there for Boss to talk to.

They flew over the patchwork towns of the Zamo Basin, their healthy pastures freshly sprung out of old Mist-soaked valleys. They stopped by the desert mining outposts of the Forgotten Continent. They visited the halcyon, frosted temples of Esto Gaza, and the homely capital of the dwarves, Conde Petie. Luth even saw the old Black Mage Village, which was supposedly the first Genome colony as well (Boss spoke only far enough on the subject to confirm that.) It was Luth's first time meeting the Black Mages, who kept a very limited, close-knit population-unlike their Genome compatriots, who had multiplied and scattered to the world's hidden corners. His impression was that they were lively and friendly, nothing like the demon puppets of lore, but more like the child-mage his ancestor wrote fondly of.

Whenever they touched base in Lindblum at the end of a string of deliveries, they went their separate ways, Boss taking nightly excursions to wherever he couldn't be found. Luth explored downtown Lindblum at his own pace, mentally charting its winding, knotted streets before retiring to his room at UE's central branch, always earlier than Boss no matter how late he wandered.

Luth was once stirred in the tiny hours by loud giggles moving down the hall, and once he arsed himself to get up and investigate, he found Boss leading a pair of strange, scantily-clad ladies (he'd wonder later if he really saw a fishnet skirt) to his room. To Luth's compounded embarrassment, Boss spotted him and gave a besotted grin and wave. "'eya, Lu! G'night," he slurred as the larger of the two women yanked him by the collar through the open threshold, followed by a slamming door.

Boss was shamelessly open about the incident the following morning as they ambled through office cubicles, paperwork and boxes breezing around them. "I normally don't do that. You should never bring a hooker into your house, Lu. You piss them off, they nick your shit. Those ladies were cool, though. They know I pay them good no matter what."

At a loss in the other departments, all Luth could weigh in was, "Well."

"What?"

A twinge of self-consciousness couldn't help him from reiterating, "You pay them 'well,' sir."

Boss recoiled a pace, tossing Luth a critical grimace. “Geez, rookie, you’re not with the grammar police, are you? All crackin’ down on a man and his hookers. That’s not a cool person to be. I hope you drop that habit.”

“Sorry, sir,” Luth murmured, thus cowed.

“Watch that s-word,” Boss chided just as the office jack-in-the-box appeared, ever disheveled with his mis-buttoned, coffee-stained white shirt and dark-rimmed eyes.

“Gato!” Pat trumpeted.

Luth was almost used to his “game” by now-he only had a *mild* heart attack.

“Meow,” Boss rolled the guess off his tongue. “No.”

“Darius.”

“Hmm!” Boss considered, piquing both Luth and Pat’s interest. “Spell it.”

Pat skipped a hopeful beat at the encouragement. “Haha! D-A-R-I-U-S.”

“Nope.”

“D-A-R-Y-U-S?”

“Almost!”

He inflated with quickening breaths. Luth hoped Pat wouldn’t have a heart attack of his own. “Holy god, really?”

Boss cackled lightly. “Haha no, I’m fucking with you. Not even close.”

“Damn!” Barely fazed, Pat snapped his fingers and sprang off his other foot, up and away.

“So,” Boss resumed, “Guess where we’re going today.”

“Where, sir?”

“Burmecia.”

Luth stopped so fast he burned his heels on the clean floor tiles. Boss was dragged to a halt ahead of him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Burmecia, sir?” Luth echoed, mortification leaking from his voice.

“Yeah, the capital. That’s where you’re from, right? It’ll be like a reunion or somethin’. We can

stop by your folks' home and everything."

"Yes, sir, but… Do we have to go?"

Boss studied his hesitation, at turns surprised and concerned. Luth was pawing the ground with one nervous foot and looking everything like a cornered… well, mouse. "Ah… no," he said at length. "No, you don't have to go. It's alright."

Luth's ears leveled with relief as he stared at the ground, a little ashamed. He wished he had a better way to communicate that he wasn't ready to return home just yet-how could he, without completing his knight's objective? The one he apparently abandoned? "Thank you, sir. I know it seems strange of me."

Boss shrugged, naturally sympathetic, regardless of whether he understood. "Don't worry about it. I won't make you go anywhere you're not comfortable."

Luth nodded sullenly and then looked up, moving on to an inquisitive tack. "So what are we going to do now?"

Boss tapped his chin thoughtfully and then placed a hand on Luth's shoulder, guiding him out of the

maze of offices and towards the lobby. “I have an idea.”

It was Luth’s cold feet for his own homeland that prompted Boss to ask on the way, “You have any family or friends here?”

“Not really, no sir. They’re all in Burmecia.”

“So you’re on your own out here?”

“That’s part of the spirit of the Pilgrimage.”

“Heheh, right,” Boss chuckled, mostly to himself.

Luth frowned, confused. “Sir, if this is about the room you gave me, I can pay—”

“Shut up, shut up, no. That’s yours,” he said emphatically. “Don’t worry about it. Call it a company perk.”

“Oh. Um, thank you, sir.”

“Listen, I was just saying, I want to be sure you’re taken care of. I told you we’re like a family. If you ever get in trouble, you can come to me. No matter what.”

“I appreciate it, sir,” Luth said softly, not knowing what else to say.

They approached the front desk. “Mornin’, Sheryl.”

Sheryl swiveled neatly in her chair and lowered her glasses at Boss, putting up a typically frosty front. “I see it’s casual Friday again,” she noted his saggy blue jeans and faded t-shirt reading ‘TASTES LIKE CHICKEN.’ “Just like Thursday, Wednesday, Tuesday and Monday.”

“It’s called being consistent.”

“If only your other attributes shared that quality. I’m getting angry calls from Miss Carawol’s lawyers, and then from the DA. If you miss another court date the regency’s going to fine you twelve thousand gil.”

“I don’t do courtrooms. Fuck ’em.”

“Sure,” Sheryl responded in stride, “And what do you want me to tell them when they ask why?”

“Spell it out.” Boss began to weave his hands through the air like a conductor. “F-U-C-K-Y-O-U. I think they’ll get the message. What else is on the planner?”

She reached to her keyboard and summoned a schedule on screen. “The A-47200 is departing for

Burmecia I.A. at 10:35 AM.”

Luth squeaked something, but Boss waved him down.

“What’s that, in like half an hour? Okay.” The Genome whirled and pointed directly at Luth. “Today I’m going to sic you on Sheryl, rookie. I’m going to run by myself while she shows you how to push papers. I know it’s not the most fun in the world, but every day can’t be a winner. Tonight we’re gonna do something cool, I promise.”

Luth agreeably accepted the assignment. “It’s okay, sir. I’d like to learn more so I can help around the office.”

Boss clapped him on the back. “Wow, you’re a real sport. Well, good luck. You two play nice.” He then strode around Luth and headed for the front gates, sliding down a stainless steel banister in lieu of stairs. “Don’t you dare do too much actual work, now!”

Luth dumbly waved after him. “Yes… sir.”

Sheryl rose with a box of paper procured from beneath her desk, which she passed heavily into Luth’s unsuspecting arms.

“I hope you like sorting.”

It wasn’t the most fun in the world, but skittering around the office all day was a refreshing change from all the restless travel Boss subjected him to. Sheryl was cool and patient with Luth, even if she didn’t have much to say to him.

After Sheryl clocked out and left Luth to his own devices, he ate some sandwiches in the café, retreated to the top floor and settled in his apartment for some evening reading. It was a dusky hour when Boss knocked on Luth’s door, inviting him into town.

Luth followed, not questioning a thing. It usually didn’t pay to ask Boss where they were going; he tended to share exactly what he was ready to share, only when he was ready (“Suspense is half the fun, Lu.”) In the meantime, their cab crawled around traffic-packed Fabool Square, Luth watching the taxi-meter run up while Boss leaned out the window to throw dinner rolls at pigeons-whole ones-Luth didn’t ask where he got a bag full of them, either.

“Hahaha, look at that one I hit right on the head! It’s stuck! It’s got like a… bread helmet. Oh shit, the

other pigeons are eating its face. This is brutal. Oh wait, it's okay, never mind."

"Um, sir?" Luth tried once Boss ran out of ammunition.

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking about what you said earlier today, sir. If we're like family, do you mind if I ask a personal question?"

"You like those, don't you? Sure, fire away."

"Are you-I mean, you and Miss Sheryl—" He glanced to his lap, where his long fingers tangled as they tried to knit his words into a proper sentence.

"Sheryl?"

"Um, yes. Do you and Miss Sheryl have a… I mean, um…"

"What? Are we fucking?"

Luth pursed his lips prudishly. "I wasn't going to say it like that, sir."

Boss rolled in place, kicking the back of the driver's seat in a fit. "Ahahaha!" he laughed for nearly a minute before catching his breath, sitting

upright and wiping the tears from his eyes. “Oh, gods. Holy freaking hell, no. Nooo way. Sheryl’s a tiger, Lu. I like ’em rough, but damn. She’ll bite your nuts off and spit ’em down the flusher. I’m not her type, anyway.”

“Oh. I only thought, the way you two talked…”

“Heh, that’s just playing around. Sheryl knows I’m kidding. We’re friends. She’s engaged, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Her fiancé’s a bit of a dick, though. Some lawyer. Tried to kick my ass once, heheh.”

“I think I might understand why-er, no offense, sir.”

“Hahahahaha. No shit. Okay, my turn.”

“Hmm?”

“Why do you call me ‘sir’ so much?”

“You didn’t leave me much of a choice, sir.”

“I know, but why do you call me that *all the time*? I’m not your drill sergeant.”

“Um.” Luth turned one ear, considering himself. “Just a habit, I guess. I always had to call my parents and instructors ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am’.”

Boss gaped a bit. “Your parents made you call them ‘sir’?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Holy shit. That explains a lot.”

Luth lowered his brow indignantly. “I beg your pardon?”

Boss shrugged with neutral surprise. “Nothing, that just seems really… rigid. It’s amazing you didn’t turn out to be a total stiff.”

Luth tried not to sound completely offended as he asserted, “I am not a… stiff, sir, and neither are my parents.”

“Of course not, kid.”

The Burmecian frowned and changed the subject the only way he could. “So where are we going, sir?”

“The Laughy Shacky.”

“Laughy Shacky?”

“Yeah. Ever been?”

Luth shook his head. “No, sir.”

Boss smiled. “Well, it’s a fun place. I think you’ll like it.”

They arrived at a bar, identical in face to all the other pubs on the block, save the jerking neon banner of a puck man laughing-or choking, one couldn’t be sure with its ’X’s for eyes. Immediately inside was a ticket booth, and beyond a spread of round tables before a quaint, spotlit stage. Various draughts were being served over the counter in a shallow recess. All the lighting was carefully arranged away from the main floor, which was cloaked in blue florescent shadows and cigarette smoke.

Luth pieced the locale with the name to finally realize he was in, “A comedy club?”

Boss cocked an eyebrow and half-grinned. “Yeah, you… didn’t think the Laughy Shacky was gonna be anything else, did you?”

“You never know, sir,” Luth replied honestly.

“Hahaha. Lu, you are *fascinating*.”

“I am, sir?”

“You have no idea.” He motioned to the ticket vendor. “Com’on, before the show sells out.”

They each ordered a drink and found a spot for two in the thickening crowd. Luth studied the business cards sewn around the frosted red glass candleholder on their table (ABBY’S CAR WASH: 20 GIL A CAR, SATISFACTION GUARANTEED OR YOUR DIRT BACK) while waiting for the first performer.

“Hey, Boss!” hailed a hulk from across the room. When he stood and waved, Luth recognized the demi-badger right away.

“Whoa, Gribbo!” Boss excitedly returned, getting up and hopping tables. Luth didn’t venture after him, instead watching the Genome sit down with Gribbo and two other men, who all chatted with boisterous familiarity.

“Sir…” he protested faintly from his lonely table. The Burmecian strained an ear over the tables in-between to catch snips of their conversation.

“Here to… Steve Dawn?”

“Yeah… funny bastard.”

“Did you… fire on…aber……amn…nt?”

“No……arne… swing a… cap…”

Luth eventually shook his head, giving up as he became aware that Boss wasn’t coming back for him. The show started without him, the club dimming to a dark roar and a man mounting the stage to rowdy applause. Luth brooded through most of the jokes; political invective wasn’t really his kind of humor. Granted, he didn’t know what his kind of humor was, but he was now sure of one more type that wasn’t.

He was at the bottom of his South Gate Iced Tea when, “This seat taken?” jarred him from his self-absorbed thoughts.

“Oh! Hello, I…” Luth beheld a woman-a Burmecian woman, no less-standing over him. “… guess not.”

She was clad in a slim, simple purple dress, her silver hair styled in waves around her slender ears. She gracefully slid into Boss’s vacant chair and offered a soft, milky hand to Luth’s calloused, dirty-yellow one. “Hi. My name’s Julia.”

Luth shook her hand and grinned in all the wrong directions, stuck between awe and idiocy. “Hi, I’m… very pleased to meet you.”

Julia folded her wrists under her chin and giggled, a sound like rain on wind chimes. “Hehe, nice to meet you too, Mr. Pleased.”

He caught himself with a nervous laugh. “Ah, um, haha. My name is Luthane. Luth. You can call me Luth.”

Julia’s gentle smile was very forgiving. “You’re with Boss Ultima?”

“Oh,” he was just reminded of Boss’s existence. “Yes. I mean, he brought me here. I mean, it’s… we’re friends,” he finished carefully.

“Oh? Where do you know each other from?”

“Well, from work. He’s my boss.”

“Really? How long have you and Boss been working together?”

“A few months. Not long at all, really.”

“Hmm. Do you like it? What do you do?”

“I’m his assistant, apparently. I just follow him around most of the time…”

He trailed off when Julia leaned over and tapped his earring, a solitary silver hoop. “That’s cute.”

A blush bristled the hair on his cheeks. “Umm, thanks.”

“So, how did you two meet?”

“It was a little funny, actually. I visited him in his office, and told him about my lineage. I wanted to ask him about the King of Thieves.”

“Really? Did you think being a Crescent would help your case? What did he tell you?”

“Nothing, unfortunately, but he hired me on the spot. I wasn’t even asking for work.”

She laughed again. “That sounds like Boss.”

“Yeah, he’s kinda hard to say no to.”

“He’s so charismatic, I think,” Julia interpreted.

“Yes, he’s very…” He glanced back to Gribbo’s table, which was packed with jolly ribbing. “… overwhelming.”

Julia followed his gaze. “It’s amazing how people just stop and listen to him. And follow him.” Her palms flatted on the table with a snap as she turned back to Luth. “But enough about him. I’d love to hear about you. Can I get you another drink?”

He tried something different: a Gulug Volcano, which he split with her. Julia asked friendly, prying questions and Luth spilled all he could, eager to please her hungry curiosity. Something in the conversation bothered him-her forward inquisitiveness, his fumbling candidness-but he couldn’t stop talking under her hypnotic stare, her eyes like amber, warm and mystical even in the pallid synthetic light.

As intrigued as Julia seemed by his family and knight’s training, the topic eventually circled back to Boss.

“Com’on!” She nudged his shoulder. “You’re his new protégé! I bet he lets you in on all kinds of juicy secrets.”

“You know, he does, but…” Luth admitted, “It’s all stuff about the company. I could tell you anything you wanted to know about how the company runs, who we do business with, who works for us, who works against us-but I still don’t know anything about him. If I even try to ask him his name he says it’s a ‘company secret.’ It’s like I know every company secret except *who runs the company*.”

“Hmm,” Julia hummed, stirring the umbrella in their drink with a straw. “Sounds like someone who

was deeply hurt."

Luth tipped his head with a clueless blink. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know. Sometimes people have different ways of dealing with a painful past. Some people try to bury it and run away instead of facing reality and accepting it."

"Do you really think so?" It was hard to think that way about Boss, a vivacious sprite.

She shrugged with a resigned flick of the wrist. "Well, who knows. How would you like to come back to my place? We can talk better there."

An alarmed prickle ran down Luth's spine and up his ears. "I don't know," he hedged and started looking for Boss, "I really shouldn't leave him al…" Spying Gribbo's empty table, he let out a gasp. "Uh-oh, where is he?"

"I saw him wander off with his buddies a while ago," Julia informed.

"Oh, no." Luth sank in his chair, looking as dismayed as a parent who lost a child. "I shouldn't have let him out of my sight. This is all my fault."

Julia patted him lightly on the shoulder. “Hehe. I think he’s a big boy. He is Boss Ultima, after all. He can take care of himself.”

“I guess so…” he reluctantly agreed, and next he knew she was pulling him to his feet. She led him outside, the citrine city still sparkling around them even without the stars, and then to her car. It was a nice car-a convertible, wine-colored. She drove him to the highrises on Pally Hill, in the west end of town, and they talked all over silly things on the elevator to her flat: pop music, cats verses dogs, bad sports to play indoors, courtroom dramas and mouse traps. He’d never talked so much nonsense in his life, and she laughed and they loved it.

The lift stopped, her door opened, and Luth was amazed.

She kept a grand studio apartment, with a wall of leaning glass and enough space to run cartwheel races. Bronze-framed paintings adorned the walls and a velvet sofa wound around a large television center and a grey-bricked hearth. There were fine plants in fine porcelain vases and fine magazines on fine tables and a fine fire that sprang to life at the clap of Julia’s hands.

“Wow…” Luth breathed, almost too apprehensive to set one filthy foot inside the finery. “This place is incredible.”

“Hehe, it’s not really,” she played modestly. “Go on, sit down! I’ll be right back.” She then disappeared into the back rooms.

He obeyed, taking a warm spot in front of the fireplace. It *was* a nice sofa, soft and rounded in just the right places, fitting his weary back like a pillow. Pillows made him sleepy. He normally didn’t stay up this late. He wasn’t anywhere near his apartment, but he was in a much nicer one. It was a *really* nice apartment. Julia was nice to let him in. They were having a nice time, and a nice drink. Now he had a nice fire to look at. Julia was a nice girl. Nice and friendly and… warm… heavy-soft-warm like… *pillows… fire… bed.*

…dreams of red candles in smoky blue bars…

Luth startled himself awake an embarrassing while later, nothing left of Julia save the note balanced on his knee.

I really enjoyed our talk tonight, Luthane.

Maybe next time we can watch a movie together, if you can stay awake for it! (Just kidding!)

Call me sometime. My number is 16-18-54-24.

P.S: Please lock the door on the way out.

He felt like a fantastic idiot all the way home, but never had the stomach to throw the note away. It sat like a stone in his pocket throughout the cab ride back to UE. He practically slept-walked across the night-lit lobby, to the lift and through the droll hotel-hall towards his door, just drunk and tired enough to feel fuzzy around the edges.

"…uuhhnnngh," issued from behind a closed door that wasn't his, and Luth paused. No, he wasn't going there. It wasn't his place, and for all the ways Boss treated him, it never would be. That was fine.

Another groan, low and plaintive and a little scary, and Luth never minded himself. He was scratching on that other door until nothing answered, and then against all his sober judgments he turned the knob and poked inside.

There was a golden darkness, like candlelight, orange streetlights spilling in through crimson curtains onto a big rumpled bed. The room smelled of wood, smoke, musk, liquor and stale bread. "Sir?" he tested the dead air.

"…Lu?" feebly mirrored a lump hanging off the side of the bed. Luth stepped up to it and crouched to join Boss on the floor.

"Sir? Are you alright?"

Boss muttered, half into his arms and half into the mattress that was a little too high to reach, "I am completely, utterly shit-faced. You have no idea how much of a feat that is."

Luth took the inert Genome under the arms and hoisted him to a comfortable height. "Let me help you into bed, sir."

"Oh, thanks Lu," he grunted and dropped like a log, his tail flicking lamely under the weight of the leg that trapped it. "You're a… you're a good sport. Just r'member, drugs are bad, rookie."

"Drugs?" Luth inspected one of the open bottles on the nightstand, sniffing the powder inside. It reminded him of Gatortown. "What did you take?"

"Oh, a few shots of gin, some tabs, a little'a dust, just trying some new stuff." He drew a long breath, wiggled uncomfortably around the covers and moaned again. "Oh, gods… I feel like my heart could stop."

Luth frowned, worried and strangely angry at once. “Why did you do this to yourself, sir?”

“It’s ca… cath… cathi…” He swallowed his spit and abandoned the thought. “Fuckit, why not. Ohhh man…” Boss blinked lethargically at the ceiling, his words tumbling out of numb lips. “Nights like this make me feel my age.”

“How old *are* you, sir?” Luth had to ask, now that he mentioned it.

“Older than I look.”

“Well that’s good, because you look sixteen, and that’s not old enough to be drinking.”

Boss’s head lolled Luth’s way, cloudy blue eyes coming to fleeting focus. “Did you quit calling me ‘sir’ for five seconds to make a funny? I am very proud of you, Lu. That’s progress.”

Luth smirked and sat on the bed. “Gee, thanks sir.”

“…Tonight’s an okay night to die…” Boss murmured, far away again.

“Please don’t talk like that, sir.” Luth forced down a frightened lump in his throat and put two fingers to the Genome’s tender neck. His skin was

slick and cold, his breathing short and hesitant and his heart frantic like a caged bird. “I think you need to go to the hospital.”

“Fuck!” Boss spat gracelessly, flopping onto his side. “No, no doctors. Leave them out of this. I’ll be just fine without one, thank you.”

Luth gulped, taken aback. “…As you wish, sir. Is there anything I can do?”

“Talk to me, Lu,” he grumbled, quiet now, like a docile dragon. “Keep me awake. Tell me more about yourself. What’re your dreams? What do you want to do with your life?”

“My life?” Luth’s heart twisted in place. It was the worst question to ask at the perfect time. He closed his eyes, considering his role in it all-in the world, in Lindblum, as a prospecting Dragon Knight, then a fallen page, now in his boss’s bedroom at three in the morning with nothing but the city’s fake fire-glow through the window and empty pill bottles on the table and a Genome’s flailing pulse under his fingertips-he sighed, and let it all out. “…I don’t know. My family wanted me to become another Dragon Knight, just like my parents and grandparents. You know, the Crescent line is famous for its Dragon Knights, starting with Lady

Freya and Sir Fratley. I started the training in the palace, but instead of undergoing the initiation rites there, I elected to take the Pilgrimage."

"Yeah, so it goes. That's very old-fashioned of you, y'know. I didn't know they still did that these days."

"It's not usual, that's true. I think I'm the first to volunteer for it in about fifty years. It's easier to take the trials at the palace, where you don't have to leave Burmecia."

"So, you came to Lindblum?"

"I was thinking about the reasons I was becoming a Dragon Knight. It didn't seem good enough to want to do it just because that's what my parents wanted. I wasn't sure if I was ready to commit myself to serving king and country for the rest of my life. I mean, Burmecia is… It's great, but you know, it's not like it was in the old days, when grand dragons were swarming the hills and everybody fought with swords and lances and magic on chocobo-back. Today we have *cars* and *guns* and *tanks* and there aren't any dragons left to slay. Sometimes it seems ridiculous to even have Dragon Knights anymore. They're just so… watered-down. They're like all the other decorations in the palace

now, just standing around to make the king look good. None of it… none of it *means* anything anymore."

"Times change. People don't change so easy. Some people have a harder time letting go of the past than others."

"Yeah, but it's like everybody's with the times but us. I just wanted to get out for a while. See what else there was. I took that diary with me-well, I stole it, really. My family probably doesn't know it's missing yet. I shouldn't have, but… I was reading it to see if I could find the reason *she* became a Dragon Knight. I thought it might inspire me."

"Did it?"

"No," he said bluntly, painfully. "It's not what I thought it would be. It just left me with more questions than answers. I haven't even been patient enough to read it to the end. That's why I came to you. I heard that the man who founded Ultima Express was related to the King of Thieves. I figured, if that's your ancestor, you might have some family secret that could help me understand my own family's past. Then I could fulfill my Pilgrimage and go home, or… I don't know. I just want to know what to do with myself."

Boss humored his little tirade, everything about it perfect and absurd. “Mmm-hmm. Listen, I’m not in a position to give you life-changing advice, but I’ll tell you this: you can’t live in the present by following the past. Let me ask, are you happy here, Lu?”

“Sir?”

“Yeah, I mean, here, this job’n stuff, n’…” He twirled a listless hand through the invisible cosmos. “…everythin’. Are you happy?”

“Sir… I’m really grateful for everything you’ve done for me, but… I still don’t feel like I have the answers I need. I haven’t figured out my path. What’s my purpose?”

Boss snorted. “Kid, some people go their whole lives without figuring that out. Sometimes the wisest thing a man can do is admit he doesn’t know.”

Catching the disheartened pall that fell over the Burmecian, Boss amended, “But hey, don’t take my word for it. You know I’m full of crap. I’m sure if you keep following your heart, you’ll get your answers. Sometimes you don’t find the things you’re after most until you stop looking for them.” He hiccupped and then growled softly, draping an arm

over his eyes. “Ugh, all this deep, philosophical shit is making me sober already.”

“What about you, sir?”

“Whuh?”

“What about your dreams?”

“Heh. Dreams. Don’t ask me, kid. I don’t have dreams. I don’t have a point. I’m just… here.”

The room was oppressively quiet. Muddled on where to go next, Luth’s gaze lingered on the crosshatched flesh around Boss’s navel. He remembered The Pen, where many old wounds were laid bare, and wondered aloud, “Where did you get all those scars, sir?”

“Hmm?” A discreet hand smoothed his shirt back down. “Oh. I’ve been around. A lot,” he answered ambiguously.

Quiet again, discomfited by another of Boss’s personal walls.

“…Do you want to know what I think?”

It wasn’t Luth’s place.

“Now you’re getting *opinions*. There’s hope for you yet.”

It never would be.

“You strike me as a very insecure person, sir. I think you’re running. I think you’ve been running for a long time. I think this job, all the… philanthropy, the sex and drugs, hiding your real name, never spending two nights in a row in your own bed-I think it’s all an escape. I don’t know, maybe someone really hurt you in the past, and instead of getting over it you just do all this… all this *bullshit* to avoid coming back to your empty flat at the end of the day and admitting that you’re alone.”

Quiet again, Boss trying to force a mute response through the most astonished expression Luth had seen him wear to date.

“…Wow,” he drawled flatly. “Just-damn. Wow. Did you just try to psycho-analyze me? And you swore, too! You are very, very cute.” Boss achingly pulled himself up onto one elbow and continued, his tone suddenly level and final-almost threatening, “Let me go right ahead and set this straight, though: if you think you’re going to sort out all my crazy, you’ve got your work cut out for you. You don’t

know me. You can’t. I’m not even being a pretentious drama queen with that, trying to sound like a special pity snowflake. There are just some things you can’t fix-some people no one can help. Don’t waste your sympathy, or my time.”

“Sir…” Luth tried, something recanted on his tongue, but he was too late and he knew it.

Boss jerked the blankets thickly around himself, shutting intruders out. “Good night, Lu,” the bedcovers spoke, and Luth picked himself up and left.

It would never be his place.

6. Therapy

6. Therapy

Luth slept in. It was not something he normally liked to do, but it was the weekend and, after his chain of fiascos last night, he didn’t care. He had a feeling Boss wouldn’t, either.

He showered and dressed in downcast spirits, rue and resentment still clinging to his fur, and headed downstairs for breakfast. The lobby was typically crowded, and the café was caught in the lull between breakfast and lunch. He stalled throughout brunch, nibbling on some biscuits and jam while watching a sports station from a comfortable lounge seat, trying to think about nothing.

The rambling football announcers and bustling daylight worked strange wonders, clearing his head in no time. Feeling a little more positive about the day, he returned to the top floor, pausing outside the office.

He could hear a television’s drone inside; Boss was up. Luth wondered what he could say. Maybe acting like nothing happened was the best idea, but it

didn’t feel right, even if Boss was adverse to apologies and admitting mistakes.

Luth rallied a full breath and pressed through, regardless. He found the Genome slouching at his desk, holding the bridge of his nose with a vexed crease to his brow. He seemed asleep until he snapped his chin up and blinked heavily at the visitor.

“Oh, hey Lu.” He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I have a monster headache. Would you turn off that TV?”

Luth stepped over and flipped it off, dead air filling the room. He swallowed and attempted to breach it. “Listen sir, about what I said last night…”

“You’re not going to apologize, are you? Don’t, remember?” Boss studied a ringed stain on his desk with a remorseful frown and shrugged. “I should be the one who’s sorry, anyway. I was a jackass, and you didn’t need my bullshit there.”

Luth freed his breath, relieved. “It’s okay, sir. I was just worried about you.”

Boss dragged himself out of his chair and stretched like a cat, grunting, “Hmn. You’re a sweet kid. What were you doing up that late, anyway?”

“Oh, um.” Luth scratched his nose bashfully. “I had just got in. I was having drinks with someone, and I guess time got away from me. I’m sorry I lost track of you, sir.”

“No sorry’s, remember? You’re not my babysitter, and I’m not yours.” He tested a lewd grin. “So, you made a friend, eh?”

“You might say that, sir. Her name is Julia.”

Boss plodded to the bookshelf opposite the window, picked through paper airplanes lodged between the volumes and crumpled them into balls. “Julia? That reporter? Nice score, man. She’s hot.”

“Reporter?!” Luth dropped his jaw.

He pitched the wrecked planes into the trash bin. “Oh yeah, I saw how she was all over you. I hope you responded in kind, rookie.”

“I didn’t know she was a reporter!” Luth squealed, flabbergasted.

“Yeah, didn’t you recognize her from Channel 8? That’s Julia Knickoff—as in, I’d totally get her knickers off, if you know what I mean.” Boss winked.

Luth wrung his hands, staring at the rug in guilty shock. “Oh gods! She could have told me…”

Boss shrugged at his distraught partner. “What? It’s no big deal. You didn’t tell her anything, right?”

“No, of course not…” He shook his head quickly.

“That’s a shame.” Boss rolled a prompting wrist. “So, what I’ve been trying to ask in six different ways is: did you tap that ass?”

“What?” Luth’s eyes widened in horror, finally catching his drift. “N-no!”

Boss smirked. “Why not?”

Luth glowered at him, dignity flaring. “I’m not like you! It’s not—I couldn’t even—she wasn’t—it wasn’t like that!”

Boss backed up, mollifying hands in the air. “Holy shit, kid. You act like I just pissed all over your grandmother’s grave. I’m almost afraid to ask, but have you tapped *any* ass, at all? Ever?”

“W-what?!” Luth was barely aware he was screaming, now. “What are you trying to say?”

Boss’s forehead fell into his palm. “Oh my God, that’s a no. And *how* old are you?”

His ears were scarlet, but at least he'd tempered his voice. "I'm twenty-three, but I don't see how—"

The Genome gaped at him. "Oh my GOD." He crossed the room in two strokes, standing directly in front of Luth. "Okay, okay, okay, let's not panic. Admitting you have a problem is the first step to healing. It's okay, I'm here for you, and tonight…" He set his hands decisively on Luth's shoulders. "You're going to get help."

"It's a surprise," was all Boss would reveal about his plan for their evening, "But first we gotta take care of some business."

Boss advised him to "dress nice" before they hitched a cab out of city limits and down into the plateau. Luth didn't have anything for that particular requisite, so he settled on the cleanest tunic in his closet. Boss wasn't much for his own advice, though Luth noted that the black slacks and untucked white dress shirt were the nicest clothes he'd seen on the Genome yet.

"I don't think sneakers go well with that, sir," was his final comment on that regard.

“What’re you, the fashion police too?” Boss riposted, and off they went.

It was a forty-minute drive through thickening twilight, Falcon’s Gate blotting out the waking stars behind them and the homely lamps of the Outer-Lindblum suburbs rising before them. It was one of the most domestic places in the world, with nice houses, trimmed lawns and dainty picket fences—the haven of the rising middle class. They arrowed through the straight, pristine streets and ventured farther, into richer country, where great estates sprawled over hundreds of acres.

Eventually the cab dumped them at the foot of nowhere, where a dirty trail snaked off the road into old, dripping woods. They hiked from there, a red moon and blue fireflies guiding them through black willows.

Luth didn’t have his usual barrage of questions. He didn’t even try to figure out where he was going; he was too busy staving off thoughts of Julia, mostly in vain. He was rather grateful when Boss took up the inquisitive front.

“You’re awfully quiet, rookie. You okay?”

Luth nodded distractedly. “Sure, sir. It’s just… nothing.”

Boss shrank a little, a strange frown brewing as he tugged on the collar of his shirt. “Do you like me, Lu? It’s okay to say no. You won’t get in trouble.”

He blinked, thrown off guard. It wasn’t a Boss sort of query. It made Luth wonder how much of his rant from last night Boss took to heart. “I… don’t approve of your lifestyle, but I still like you, sir,” he answered, carefully candid.

“Haha,” Boss quietly chuckled at the ground.

Since he was asking, Luth had to return the favor. “Do you like *me*, sir?”

“Heh, of course I do. I wouldn’t have hired you if I didn’t like you.”

“I suppose that’s true. What’s this all about, sir? Where are you taking me?”

“Don Gator’s house.”

“Don Gator?!” Luth’s eyes widened, their whites flashing in the dark. “What in the world are we going *there* for?”

“Well, ah…” Boss’s gaze roamed evasively. “You know, Lu? I have a confession to make. Remember that thing you heard about my company and drug trafficking?”

“You mean those rumors, sir?”

“Yeah, well… they’re true.”

It was a quiet moment before Luth remembered himself and uttered, “…What?”

Boss elaborated quickly, “You know all those delivery runs you’ve been doing with me? Most of those have been for Don Gator—well, Leo and Armond, specifically. I’m their carrier. But they go through Don. Hell, I do most of Don’s legwork, straight through my company. Don’t worry, you’re not an, ah, accessory or implicated or whatever.” He rolled his shoulders conservatively. “Well, until now, I guess.”

Luth threw up his hands. “Dear gods, sir! I would’ve liked to have known this sooner.”

“Hey, I can’t just tell anyone about this stuff. It’s confidential! Besides, I didn’t think you’d take it well.”

“I shouldn’t, sir! I’m getting a little tired of being deceived lately.” Luth huffily stormed ahead.

Boss stumbled over that, the paces between him and Luth rapidly filling with boggy nightfall. “Uh, kinda like how you’re taking it now.” He skipped several steps to catch him. “Oh, Lu—Lu! Hey! Is that what this is about? That reporter?”

Luth stopped and crossed his arms, refusing to face him.

Boss set his hands on his hips, peeved. “Geez, Lu, it’s not like she was writing a story on you!”

“What if she was, sir?” Luth whirled on him, not throwing the notion out. “What if she was trying to use me to get a story on you, or the company?”

“Nah,” Boss waved his concern down, “Julia wouldn’t do that.”

Luth narrowed an accusing glare at him. “And how would you know that, sir?”

“Ah, uhm,” Boss choked on his words. “Well…”

Luth buried his face in his hands, dreading what he was about to hear. “Oh gods, sir…”

The Genome gave another hedging shrug. “I was the one who told her about you.”

Not staying for another word, Luth turned and marched away again.

“Lu, Lu!” Boss yelled after him. “Hey, com’on, it’s not what you think!”

“What am I supposed to think, sir?!” Luth’s voice ricocheted back, strange and angry off the weeping trees.

“She found me last night, at the club! We’ve known each other for a while, actually. She’s been hounding me for an interview for ages. We had a nice chat for a while and then I pointed her over to you, that’s it. I thought she might be your type.”

Luth finally stopped. It was too dark; he didn’t know where he was going. He didn’t know why he was going. His proud shoulders sagged as he stared at an inscrutable ground, damp and gross between his toes, like walking on toads.

Somewhere behind him, Boss barely pleaded, “You’re not really that mad at me, are you?”

“Sir, I…” When Luth looked back, Boss was still there, waiting for him, warily distant. The

Burmecian cleared his throat, trying to make sense of his feelings—Julia, Burmecia, Ultima Express, Don Gator, *him*. Pilgrimages weren't supposed to be this complicated.

"…No. I'm not mad, sir. I appreciate the thought, but I would appreciate it more if you didn't set me up like that anymore."

"Oh." He rubbed his chin, chewing on the request. 'Okay. Yeah, sure. I don't want to be a pest.' Boss scooted closer and asked with an oddly confidential air, considering they were already alone, "You're not gay though, are you? I mean that's okay if you are; I swing both ways, myself."

Luth jumped back. "What?! No!"

"Okay, okay, just checkin'," Boss rolled along.

"Sir, I definitely don't—wait, you mean you have…?" He shook his head with a shudder. "No, please don't answer that, sir."

"Ahahahaha, you're cute when you're embarrassed, Lu. Relax, it's not what you think. I'm never what you think. Listen… I don't want you to feel like I'm betraying your trust. I mean, I like you—platonically, if you must know—and I trust you a

lot. That's why I wanted you to come with me tonight. I want you to be my righty."

"Righty, sir?" Luth echoed, still perturbed.

"Yeah, you know, my 'right hand man.' That what we call 'em." Boss scratched the back of his neck. "I know it's asking a lot at once, but I hope you can trust me back."

Luth bit his lip, then sighed. "…I guess I don't have a choice but to go along, for now."

"That's the spirit. Close enough, anyway."

Their stroll continued in peace and cricket-chirps. A lukewarm beacon shone through the tree line, far down the road. Soon their infamous destination would be in sight. "So, sir, you're really a… drug dealer?" he had to ask.

"No, no no, Lu," Boss insisted. "I don't deal drugs! Geez. I just ship them. And just drugs—not weapons. That's Pevy's department. Giving a bunch of tripped-out dusterheads guns? That's just bad business. Besides, I don't like guns. I had someone in the family who was a weapons dealer. It kinda did him in. He died a long time ago."

Sepia pages of Black Mages and eidolons flitted through his head. “…I think I know who you mean, sir.”

Boss hesitated, something startled in his wide-eyed stare, but then his mien melted with a cryptic grin and he moved on.

Luth had to move on, as well. “Has your family always been in the… uh…”

“Mob? Eh, you might say that. On and off,” he flaked. “Now, Gator’s gang? I think you’ll like ’em, heheh.”

“I think we have differing opinions on what I like, sir.”

“Ahaha. If it makes you feel better, we won’t be staying long. Gonna eat-and-run.”

Just before the manor was an impressive wrought-iron gate with a security booth. Boss had a brief and efficient chat with the guard, who gruffly asked, “Wha’ddya got for us?”

“Cherry lollipops,” Boss automatically responded, and the gate peeled open with a soft creak.

“Cherry lollipops, sir?” Luth wondered once they were inside and out of the guard’s way.

“Are you offering?” Boss brightly returned. “Heheh, just kidding. It’s a password, rookie.”

“Oh. Are you sure it’s okay for me to be here?”

Boss looped an arm around Luth’s shoulders—a little awkwardly, the Genome too short for him—and stuck a self-assured thumb at his chest. “Sure it is. You’re with me. That’s what you tell anyone who asks.”

The Gators dwelled on the crook of a turbid bayou in a sprawling ranch-style house, nothing too pressing on the marshy soil. Several muddy cars were haphazardly parked around the four-port garage, and smoldering lawn candles donated a fragrance to the lawn that was repulsive to insects.

Boss was furtively hashing out the Gatortown roster as they approached the screened front porch.

“Don has five bosses working under him. They do most of his dirty work, and each get different shares of his domain. Pevy’s with weapons, Leo gets dusters, Armond does grass, I worry about shipping

and handling, and Arpy's, uh… Well, his status as a boss is more honorary than anything. He's got a rather… stilted take on humanity. You'll see what I mean in a minute."

Yokel tunes and the smell of cheap beer and rich tobacco welcomed Luth on the porch, where a moogle in a black vest chewed on a cigar while sitting on a stereo box.

"God damn, who let the whole zoo in?" the moogle barked at the visitors, and Luth stepped back as the fairy lurched forward, buzzing towards Boss on nubby bat-wings. "You monkey-fucking son of a bitch!" he greeted raucously, and Boss returned the sentiment with a big hug.

"Oh Arpy, I knew one of you still loved me!" the Genome fawned melodramatically. Meanwhile, "Bloody Christ, Ultima's here," sounded from indoors.

"Ack, bastard!" the moogle gagged as it squirmed in Boss's snug grip. He pried himself free and hit the floorboards with a squeaky thud, like a big dog toy. Arpy sprang back to his perch and reclaimed his haughty demeanor, a cigar dancing in one corner of his mouth as he ranted, "It's about time you showed

up! This party was getting more stale than the crust off Gator's left ass cheek."

"Holy hell're you late!" blasted the devil, and the front door burst open for a portly demi-gator, all blue and black mottled scales in wide khaki pants and an aloha shirt. Luth didn't need a second guess to figure out that this was the Don.

Boss simply shrugged. "I took the scenic route."

"The hell you did!" Don guffawed, and—as if by his own gravity—dragged Boss through the threshold. "We were about to start without ya."

Luth reluctantly followed, opting to keep his boss company over hanging out with Arpy on the porch. Getting off Don's tail, he veered out of the vestibule and into a deserted lounge, drawn instead to the quiet, free space. Raised chatter carried on without him, deeper into the house. It seemed he hadn't been noticed, which didn't really bother him. Luth didn't know what to do with himself in such company yet, anyway, and Boss was too far gone to give him a clue. He bid his time in the lonely room, waiting for a cue.

Despite outward appearances, the interior was clean and classy white, with mint upholstery and

crystal light fixtures. The house wasn't grand on most scales, but impressed with finery. Luth sat down on a leather sofa and surveyed the gallery of photographs on the walls.

It was an artless spread of family portraits, wedged between windows and around doorframes—mostly alligators, sometimes others. Some locales Luth recognized from Gatortown or downtown Lindblum. Some pictures were grey and frayed with old blood, and others crisp and bold with new.

Luth eventually rose to inspect something in the middle, a wide shot of several families in a happy row. A brown demi-gator and his sleek black mate stood amidst a brood of little Gators, and flanking them were litters of humans and other demis, none of the lot Luth recognized. Three figures on the right caught his eye, however: a man that eerily resembled Boss, standing with a woman and small child of his likeness—all blonde, blue-eyed and fuzzy-tailed.

"So!" boomed a hulking figure behind Luth's shoulder, and the Burmecian nearly knocked his head on the ceiling with a jump.

"Bwahaha!" Don Gator slapped his jolly belly. "Scared your peach fuzz off, did I?"

“H-hello, um…” Luth gulped to catch his breath.

“So!” Don resumed, “You’re Ultima’s righty now.”

“Oh.” Luth straightened and nodded. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“You suppose! Gwaha. You’re somethin’. Luthane Crescent, right?”

“Yes, sir.” He wondered where his full name had been dropped. It didn’t seem likely that Boss remembered it, but the Genome was always full of surprises.

Don’s pat on the shoulder was like the fall of a hammer, and Luth had to brace his feet for it. “Great, great, nice to meet’chya. Crescents are good people. You be careful around that monkey, now; he’s a crazy bastard, just like his old man.”

Luth blinked, a little amazed. “You knew his father, Mister—Don… sir?” he tapered off uncertainly.

“Just call me Don, kid. And hell, I knew ’im.” Don turned a high chin and wistful eye to the photograph Luth was inspecting moments before. “I knew his mother for years, especially once the old

man kicked off and she took over. She was a real firecracker—classy like fine china, sharp like a whip."

Luth didn't linger on how little sense that made and asked instead, "Is that her, in the picture? What was her name?"

"Meridia, a beautiful name for a beautiful lady. Can't remember Ultima Senior's name to save my life, now that I'm thinkin' on it. He was always sneaky about it—guess that's where junior got it from. But I'll be damned if I forget his name now, what-how Meridia used to scream it all over my back porch. 'Alfy, you get out of that bayou! A croc's gonna eat ya!' Gwahaha."

"Alfy?" Luth studied the grinning imp twined around his parents' legs, fascinated. "That's his name? Really?"

"You mean ya didn't know that? Oh. Well!" Don muttered through a long row of jagged teeth, 'Ya didn't hear it from me, kiddo.' Luth gave the belittling term a fractured smirk while Don reared back with another laugh. "Gwahaha. Of course it's short for somethin' classy, ah, kinda strange… Well, damn me to five of seven hells, I can't remember after all. Bwahaha."

Luth pointed at the patriarchal demi-gator in the center. “Is that your father, then?”

“Ah, sure as hell, that’s my old man, Maton Gator. An’ that’s me there, about to knock my little sister’s lights out. Ah, good times.”

“Dinner’s ready!” A female gracefully announced, and Don pushed Luth into the dining room.

Luth was reunited with Boss at the table, where an extra chair had been procured for him. Don’s wife laid out a voluptuous feast of fowl, potatoes and beans, and the whole mob troupe dug in while Don sat at the head of it all, relaying pertinent business between mouthfuls. Luth stayed absorbed in his meal and didn’t dare a word, so he was pleasantly ignored. There was much to say without him, apparently, and Luth gathered all he could about his fellow guests with a patient ear—watching everything, looking at nothing.

They talked over his head about “deals,” ‘runs,’ “hooks,” and miscellaneous jargon that hurt Luth’s sense of ethics just to overhear, much less comprehend. In a careful aside, Boss at least

managed to explain what “dusters” and “grass” were: illegal drugs, as a matter of course.

Boss Leo was unsurprisingly a demi-lion, suave of voice and gesture. His every word was purred or growled, and his coal mane was neatly tied back with three ribbons. He was accompanied by Greasy Ricky, who looked grateful enough to still have his genitals intact.

Boss Armond was a pale, lanky, unassuming character until he spoke, his few lines poignantly sarcastic.

Boss Pevy was loud and fire-haired, the silverware shuddering under the pounding of his fist. He would be spitting venom one moment and chortling merrily the next. His righty was a man introduced as Maroon, whose moniker matched the hue of his dull, limp hair. Unlike his boss, he was intensely quiet and serious. Every time Luth glanced his way, Maroon would be staring straight back with sharp features and quicksilver eyes.

Arpy sat opposite Don with a large bowl of kupo nuts, firing billingsgate at everything that breathed. “That’s because Pevy’s cousin’s a ripe old cunt—won’t even take a hit to save her mother’s life. Everyone’s in Zamo’s a dirty whore just like that. I’d

rather blow a Qu for nickels than shell out to anyone from Zamo. Worse than Guntans. Almost as bad as Burmecians."

"Don't listen to him," Leo rumbled aloofly in response to Luth's toothy grimace. "Arpy hates all peoples."

"I didn't hate your mother that night in Treno!" the moogle shot back, and Pevy slapped the table with an outrageous cackle while Leo put up a noble scowl.

"All right, you lugs, pull it together," Don reeled them in. "There's one more piece of business I'd like to discuss tonight. I was unfortunate enough to read the paper yesterday morning and learn that Grand Castle was robbed of the Falcon Claw."

The table stilled—even Arpy quit chewing on a nut for a reverent moment. Boss rested his chin on steepled fingers, staring dimly at the tablecloth. Beyond him, Luth met Maroon's piercing gaze again. He flinched and shied away.

"As a lifelong citizen of Lindblum, I am deeply grieved to hear of the loss of our national treasure. It is an insult to our great nation and its heritage." Don sighed shortly and held a hand over his heart. "I only

wish that whoever committed this heinous crime would've come to me first—I could've helped 'em out."

The guests broke into snickers. Arpy cracked another kupo nut in one strong mitt. Boss remained silent.

"Who would be stupid enough to do that?" Ricky was first to ask. "Nobody nicks somethin' that hot—not even Lord King, and that guy's got the Alexandrian fuckin' crown jewels in his vault."

"The press says a band called the Red Angels did it," Armond contributed.

"I've got a guy in the castle, says he saw 'em," Arpy eagerly volunteered. "Says he nearly got his pom-pom whacked off by one of 'em. They were all dressed in black and climbed up the walls like goddamn spiders. Ninja fuckin' spider monkeys."

"Well, whoever they are, they're good," Don grunted. "They're too good. What else do we know about these people?"

"Virtually nothing." Pevy shrugged. "The pigs are clueless."

Don wagged a fat finger. “Then find out. I want you all to find out as much as you can about these punks, especially if they’re after the other Jewels.”

After the table was cleared, Luth was finally able to strike up conversation with someone: Don’s wife, Emilia, who turned out to be the most gracious alligator Luth had ever met. She politely endured Luth’s nervous reservations and gave him a tour of the house, elaborating on the colorful history of the Gator family as they went.

Luth was about to offer his hand at washing the dishes in exchange for her courtesy when someone pulled him aside—he was startled to see it was Maroon.

“I believe you dropped this,” he said succinctly, passing Luth a shoulder pack.

“Huh?” When Luth realized it was *his*, he thankfully accepted it. “Oh! So I did. Thank you.”

A fleeting, feral smile crossed Maroon’s visage, somehow making him look more threatening than without. “It’s no problem.” He then turned and vanished.

Boss popped up, snagging Luth by the arm. “Hey, there you went!” He nodded at Emilia and began to tow his rightie towards the front door. “Thanks for the sweet grub, Mrs. Gator, but Lu and I gotta bolt. Say goodnight, Lu.”

“Oh, um—” Luth stammered, finding his bearings through a hasty farewell. “Sorry, Mrs. Gator! Thank you very much for everything.”

She giggled demurely and waved the pair out. “Don’t be a stranger, Luthane. You too, Ultima!”

Their cab was waiting where they left it. Luth didn’t bother to comment on how absurdly high the fare was going to run, but he did want to throw out something, since Boss was strangely quiet on the hike back. Suddenly it felt like his turn to break the ice.

“So, sir… Was that the surprise you were talking about for tonight?”

“Huh?” Boss snapped, waking from a daze. He then lightened on Luth’s thought. “…Oh! No, no rookie. I’ve got somethin’ better than that. I’m taking you to meet Susan.”

“Susan? Who’s that?”

“She’s my therapist.”

“I didn’t know you saw a therapist, sir.”

“Well, Susan’s not your typical therapist, but whenever I feel down she always perks me right up,” he explained with a crafty grin.

Luth tipped his head back, looking for the red moon at its zenith. “She sure keeps late hours, sir.”

“Yeeeeah, that she does,” Boss said shiftily, and left the rest to Luth’s imagination.

Nothing Luth pictured in his mind ended up matching the scene at the southeast corner of Lindblum’s old Theater District. Tucked behind a derelict artisan shop was a sloping alley that stopped at the foot of a soot-shrouded storefront.

Suspicions well past raised, Luth had to enquire, “This doesn’t lead to Gatortown, does it?” as Boss circled around to a cellar door and kicked it open.

“Nah, better,” Boss assured him, and Luth followed his lead down a flight of stairs. Each step

brought them closer to loud, undulating beats and muted, flickering lights. When Boss opened the door at the bottom, Luth was assaulted with techno beats, glitter-shaded spotlights and a barrage of odors that reminded him of Boss's bedroom in every wrong way.

There was a bar on the left with a decent selection of drinks, but it was the horseshoe stage to the right with the women clad in fur and threads dancing around poles while shady men on the floor stuffed paper bills into their thongs that gave Luth a better idea of the spirit of the establishment.

Luth's stunned gape was left unattended as Boss sidled up to the bar and blew a kiss at a lady cleaning mugs. She set down her glass and rag and sat up on the countertop, crossing her bare legs over the side. She was wearing an adequate skirt and a buttoned-up vest, but that didn't really allay Luth's fears. "It's been a while, Ultima."

Boss drummed his fingers on the bar and his tail on an adjacent barstool. "What's up, Susan?"

Susan flicked her blonde ponytail to the side and imparted a sultry smile. "Back for the usual?"

He reached back and tugged Luth closer. “Actually, I was hoping you could educate my friend here. He needs to chill out.”

Luth shook his head furiously. “Hey!”

Boss leaned over the bar, whispering to Susan with no subtle implications, “This is his first time, so take it easy, alright?”

Luth jumped to Boss’s ear, thoroughly mortified. “Sir!! What are you doing?!”

The Genome grinned dumbly at him. “What do you think I’m doing? I told you I was going to introduce you to Susan.”

“This is a brothel!” he hissed. “You’ve taken me to see a prostitute, not a therapist!”

“She’s a sexual therapist.”

“Sir!! I am *extremely* uncomfortable here! Can we please talk outside?”

Susan lowered a baffled look at Boss. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah,” Boss replied uneasily, stuck between the girl and the Burmecian with a death-grip on his

wrist. “Uh… alright. Just a sec.” He nodded at Susan and followed Luth’s fleeing tail.

“Sir,” Luth panted at the top of the stairs, not even affording Boss the chance to ask what’s wrong, “I’m going to have to draw a line here.”

All Boss did in response was cross his arms and grin smugly. “I was wondering where you’d finally do that!”

Luth was struck with utter exasperation. “What??” He shook himself lucid. “No, no, listen sir, I really don’t want to do this!”

Boss gave a cool shrug. “I know you’re saying that now, but tomorrow you’re going to thank me.”

“I’m pretty sure this is and will remain a bad idea, sir,” he said stonily.

“You Dragon Knights don’t take a vow of celibacy now, do you?”

“What?! No! I just, that’s not the—”

“Then what’re you so worked up about? Lighten up, rookie. Girls don’t bite. Unless you want them to.”

Luth stamped his feet desperately. “No, stop! Just no. I don’t approve of this! I’m putting my foot down, sir.”

Boss frowned. “Don’t approve? What’re you, some old spinster? Hey rookie, you’re a twenty-three year-old male in his prime! What’re you waiting for?”

“Maybe I do want to wait! Maybe I…” Dear gods, why was he out here defending his—how did he even get to this point? “M-Maybe I’m saving myself. For the right girl.”

What followed was the most critical silence of Luth’s life. Nothing moved; Boss didn’t even breathe, until…

“…ahahahaHaHaHAHA!” he exploded. Luth could only stand and watch, first stunned, then embarrassed, and then downright annoyed as his boss continued laughing out of control, holding the rotten brick wall for support.

Luth ineffectively pouted, waiting for the Genome’s riotous outburst to simmer down. “Are you done, sir?”

It took several big gulps of air to quench the fit, but finally Boss was able to speak again. “Oh God.

I’m sorry,” he chuckled. He righted himself and sauntered up to Luth, resting one hand on his shoulder. “Lu, Lu, Lu. Do you trust me?”

“I think you’re drunk, sir.”

“I wish. Do you trust me?”

Luth let the question stew for a minute. “…Yes, sir,” he admitted broodingly.

“Have I let you down yet?”

“Well, um… Not really.”

“Do you really, really, *really* not want to meet Susan? I promise she’ll give you a good time.”

He swallowed, almost whimpering. “I really don’t, sir…”

Boss put up a resigned smile, nodded slowly and patted Luth’s cheek. “Okay. Alright. I said I wouldn’t force you to go anywhere you’re not comfortable, and I’m keeping my word.” He started back up the alley. “Let’s go home. We’ll try again on your birthday.”

“Sir!!”

7. Oeilvert

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The next weekend, Boss took Luth to a *McMoogles* restaurant, not so much for the cuisine (it was cheap and greasy, and Luth could sympathize with the moogles who boycotted the fast food chain and its “fried pom-poms” special—even if it was attested they weren’t made from real moogle pom-poms) as for Boss’s longing to play in the ball pit of its courtyard, the one designed for small children.

As a matter of course, they got kicked out, not so much for breaching playground etiquette as for arguing with staff (“Whaddya mean I’m too big to go in there? That lady’s kid is like twice my size and he’s allowed in.”) Once Luth was sufficiently embarrassed, they left.

“That wasn’t very tactful, sir,” Luth lectured him on the way out of the parking lot. “That boy’s mother looked like she was going to kill you.”

Boss shuffled the seat of his pants and an errant ball spilled out one leg, rolled under a parked car

and disturbed the flock of pigeons taking shade there. “So? I could take ’er.”

Luth tried not to smile as he chided, “You’re like a big kid, sir.”

“Psst. Lu.”

Luth egressed from an uncomfortable dream about being stoned to death by his kinfolk—except they were using dinner rolls, not real stones, and his father held the breadbasket—his dreams rarely made sense—to his safe, comfortable bed in his room.

“Hey, Lu,” whispered the chair at his bedside, and when it reached out and nudged him Luth propped open one drowsy eye.

Boss appeared in the chair, perched on his toes like a big, squat bird. “Uh…” Luth blinked, both eyes cracking awake. “…sir?”

“Mornin’, Lu,” he spoke softly, as if not to disturb the *other* Luth still asleep in bed. “Sleep well?”

“It’s…” Luth stretched one arm towards the alarm clock on the nightstand, turning its red face

into his line of sight. “Not even seven in the morning yet.”

Boss leaned on his elbow, a tiny, wistful smile bunched up in one cheek as he mumbled, “I know. I couldn’t sleep.” His tail flopped restlessly over the back of the chair as he shifted upright. “Are you ready to go somewhere new today?”

Luth agreed to the adventure, provided Boss gave him a few minutes of privacy to shower and dress. It was eight o’clock and a pleasantly yellow morning by the time they had eaten breakfast and were ready to depart.

They were taking one of the company’s small, private airboats out of Lindblum; Gribbo agreed to fly them. This was already unusual, since they typically hitched rides on the big cargo ships, going wherever commerce demanded.

What was especially strange, though, was not only that Boss bid Luth carry his halberd (it had come in handy against wild beasts before, on their more outlandish deliveries), but that the Genome had armed himself as well, a sheathed dagger

clipped heavily to his belt. Before Luth could find a good place to voice his curiosity, Boss beat him to it.

“You were a Dragon Knight, right?”

“I was still in training, sir,” Luth patiently reminded him.

“You’ve got the skills to pay the bills, though?” he persisted.

“I—what?” The puzzled furrow to his brow deepened. “I’m fairly proficient with polearms, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good, good.” Boss hopped over the top rung of the ladder, hitting the wooden deck of the *Good Graces* with a nimble thud.

“Um, why do you ask, sir? Are we going somewhere dangerous?” Luth took his time climbing aboard, one long leg after the other.

“Don’t worry about it.” Boss waved to Gribbo in the pilot’s cabin, and the aircraft shuddered to life.

It took a long day westward before they arrived at the Forgotten Continent, where Boss indicated

they'd be visiting a place called Oeilvert. Luth recalled the name from his family reading, and if he were to take Lady Freya's word for it, Oeilvert was not a place for tourists. It was a hovel for exotic, deadly monsters, and magic had long been stricken from its land. Its part of the continent had never even been settled, still a pristine wasteland after countless centuries.

The time Luth would have spent speculating over their imminent danger was instead wasted in moping off the port side. Boss rose from his nap below deck and stepped out to find him.

"Hey, Lu!" he yawned as the brisk, arid wind ruffled his bearings. "There you are."

"Hmm?" Luth's attention jumped out of the rocky gulf far below. "Oh, hi sir."

Boss shared the railing with him, admiring the sun-scorched vista. He examined Luth's brooding frown with a puzzled one of his own. "Why the longer face than usual?"

Luth admitted with chagrin, "I lost Lady Freya's diary, sir. I was looking for it last night, but it was gone. I don't know what I did with it. It was in my backpack, last I remember."

“And now it’s not, huh?”

He somberly shook his head.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll turn up somewhere,” Boss tried.

“I certainly hope so, sir. I don’t know how I’ll ever face my family again if I’ve lost it.”

He snorted reassuringly. “Heh, I’m sure they’re more forgiving than that.”

Luth wasn’t amused. “You just don’t know, sir. I didn’t even get to finish reading it…”

“You didn’t, huh…?” Boss trailed off with him, staring into the amber-fire on the horizon. “Huh.”

“Say, sir?” Luth began, hoping to take his mind off his carelessness, “Can we talk about something?”

“Sure,” Boss chirped, “We can talk about anything.”

“I was wondering if you’re ready to tell me your real name.”

Boss’s focus dropped to his weaving thumbs. “Anything but that.”

Luth gave an importuning shrug. “But sir, why not? I know we haven’t really been working together that long, but I still feel like we’ve been through a lot. You’ve taken me to Gatortown, and all those places all over the world, and even to Don Gator’s house. You said you trust me. Why won’t you trust me with that? It’s been bothering me since we met.”

Boss pushed himself off the railing, faced Luth and clapped a hand around his arm. “Oh, Lu, Lu,” he sighed, staring straight through the Burmecian. ‘I’m not gonna lie to you.’ He then cast a glance over the side of the boat, spotting the steeple-capped ruin at the heart of the desert’s spiraling canyon. “Oh look, we’re almost there,” he airily announced, and spun towards the cabin. “Let’s get ready to roll.”

“Hey!” Luth flared after him. He stood back and set his jaw, determined not to let Boss get away so easily for the hundredth time. He didn’t really want to resort to it, but he was at the end of his rope on the matter.

“I heard your parents used to call you Alfy.”

Boss tripped over his heel, fell onto the guardrail for support and began choking, turning an interesting shade of grey. Luth stood over him, patting his back until the fit subsided.

“Where did you hear that?” the Genome coughed.

“He doesn’t want me to tell you. But what’s wrong with that name, sir? And what’s it short for?”

“Geez.” He rubbed his brow. “How long have you been holding on to that ace?”

“Only a week or so, sir.”

“It was Don, wasn’t it?”

Luth grimaced and reluctantly confirmed, “That’s a good guess, sir.”

Boss settled with a deep breath and slouched over the rail, closing his eyes. “…Althier,” he muttered.

“Althier?” Luth echoed, to be sure.

Boss nodded away from him.

“That’s a very interesting name. I like it, sir. Don’t you?”

“It’s not…” Boss straightened and rubbed his nose. ‘Just listen, you can’t tell anyone about it, you understand?’ He dropped a glare on the Burmecian, who reared back a little, surprised by the dark shift in mood. “And you are definitely *not* allowed to call me that. I mean it.”

Luth tested a pacifying half-grin. “Company secret, right, sir?”

Boss blinked at him, his icy mask thawing, and then chuckled thickly into his hand. “…Heh, haha. I don’t think I give you enough credit sometimes, Lu.”

The *Good Graces* touched down at least a mile from their destination, so they had to brave the rest of the way on their own. Boss explained that any closer would put Gribbo and the vessel at unreasonable risk, and he didn’t know how well the boat’s controls would respond to the anti-magic field, besides. Neither excuse put Luth’s heart at ease, but he was ready for whatever hazards laid ahead. A Dragon Knight was trained to be ready for anything.

“I haven’t been here in a long time,” Boss continued as they sauntered along the parched bed of a winding gorge. At the pit of the trail was the semblance of a cathedral, one of tiered mica, sheer onyx and twisted black opal. It looked like a giant fallen canary, one broken wing clawing at the brazen

sun. “It’s kinda dangerous, and you don’t want to go in alone. If we’re lucky, you won’t have to see why.”

Luth adjusted his halberd across his back. “Are we in real danger, sir?”

“Only if you let your guard down!” Boss mounted the tall steps leading to a pair grandiose arching doors. Luth was marveling at the incredibly alien pictographs and architecture surrounding such mundane things as stairs and doors when one of the slabs cracked open, seemingly of its own accord.

Boss flashed a secret grin and bowed towards the entrance with a flourish. “Welcome to Oeilvert.”

It smelled of dust, ash and ozone inside. Dusk peered through the translucent, swirling windows, painting a garden of orange roses across the hodgepodge tiled floor and bending walls. There were no right corners, nothing straight, nothing simple and orderly. There were bricks like mushrooms and tree limbs, everything warping and melting into everything else. There were boxes and globes that looked like machines, nested in stony talons that looked like animals, sitting inside triangle-runes that looked like signposts, but as he stood in the threshold and breathed nothing moved, nothing worked. It was a monument to entropy,

perfectly still and always moving, as if the entire edifice had been cast in cool lava.

Just looking at it made Luth a little dizzy. “Why are we here, sir?” he finally asked.

Boss strolled up to a small door like a man unimpressed, knowing exactly where he was going. “I need answers to certain questions.”

“Like what, sir?”

“That’s between me and the stoneheads.”

Luth’s left ear ticked quizzically, but he didn’t push his luck. He followed Boss out of the disorienting vestibule and into a chamber just as confusing, with doors and windows at odd angles and paths flowing out of nowhere around an empty, circular depression in the ground.

“This place is like a shrine.” Boss’s voice clattered across the scaly ceiling. “It’s pretty sacred to the Genomes. There’s a lot of history here—I know you like that kinda stuff. Feel free to look around.”

Luth indulged his urge to explore a little while Boss criss-crossed the room, rapping on lanterns and flipping switches the Burmecian never would have

descried on his own. Passages yielded to the very sound of his footsteps, and glass bulbs he touched would glow with soft red pulses. On the other hand, nothing Luth examined would respond, so he eventually gave up and stood idle, listening and waiting for the monster ambush he was dreading.

Luth was tracing a big, clawed toe along the etchings in the floor when Boss waved him over to a quaint hatch at the farthermost corner of the room, at the end of a narrow sidewalk.

“I want you to guard this door,” the Genome instructed. “I don’t need monsters banging it down while I’m in there.”

“I can’t go in with you, sir?”

“Nah, sorry, this is…” He scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. “It’s personal. You’d really help me by keeping an eye out here. But listen, rookie: if it starts to get really hairy, don’t be afraid to run like hell. You totally have permission to save your own ass.”

Luth took his halberd and stuck it in the floor, adopting a soldier’s stance. “I won’t budge, sir.”

“Heh, you’d make a great Dragon Knight, Lu,” was all Boss said before slipping around the door

and shutting Luth out.

He waited. He checked his watch-less wrist. He scanned the chamber for a clock he wouldn't find. He watched the sinking daylight turn a subtler shade of red. It was a good thing he didn't stay in the palace to complete his Dragon Knight's training, because he would have done terribly at rounds. His lack of patience was one of his bigger failings.

Despite his short attention span, Luth was quite relieved. Lady Freya had written that *'beasts and birds of stone fell upon us from all impossible avenues, as phantoms through walls,'* but as Luth kept vigil in the depths of the cursed shrine, it remained as tranquil as a tomb. He was beginning to wonder if all of Oeilvert's terrors had died out before him when he heard a gravelly whisper across the hall. When he looked, ears perked high in that direction, nothing appeared off. After a minute of intense scrutiny, the scenery remained unchanged, so Luth faced forward again, folding his arms around the shaft of his weapon with a bored sigh.

skkkkrrrrritt, grumbled the floor again, the sound of stone dragging over stone. Luth whirled that way just in time for the noise to cease. Now, he thought, something looked misplaced, but he couldn't pin his

eye on it. Another protracted minute of study yielded nothing, so Luth turned away and, noting the dormant globe in the corner of his vision, trained a squint on its reflective sheen. He was going to catch *something* in the act of *something* if it was the last thing he—

skkkkrrrrii—there, in the inverted shadows, a skittering *mass*—Luth pounced backwards, landing behind a… block of rubble? It wobbled to a halt in front of him. Luth paced around it, his steel blade held firmly between himself and the anomaly.

It looked like a wardrobe, of all things. It was a great granite closet with a pair of engraved tablets for doors (even in the failing light Luth saw the text had worn away, now too blurry to read) and a gargoyle peeking over the top. Maybe it more resembled an elaborate headstone, on second thought, but it was none-the-less an impossible thing to move on its own power. Luth would be damned it he didn't *see* it, though…

He tapped it experimentally with his polearm. The half of him that wasn't expecting the wardrobe to shudder stumbled over the half that was, and whether Luth was ready for it or not, the entire oddity blew open with an incandescent blast. Luth

flew back in alarm, halberd crossed protectively, awaiting some wayward not-magic.

When the flash faded, the dusk seemed much richer than before, a red-violet pall descending over the room. Luth could barely discern the creature that had appeared in the wardrobe's defense. The crouching thing rose on gnarled claw-toes and angular legs, in lean body and blue tunic, with swishing whip-tail and long, strong arms. Its pointed ears swiveled through sagging brown hair.

It was a Burmecian.

It grinned, craggy pearls sneering beneath milky hollow eyes, and bared its dragon-winged halberd.

It was *Luthane*.

His second-hand memory knew epitaphs now, on the brink of too late. By the time Luth had recovered from the trauma of discovering a copy of himself, the clone was knitting a full-length looking-glass out of the twilight-ether.

'Don't look into their mirrors,' his mother's ancestor warned. *'They'll steal your soul.'*

Luth didn't wait for any more bewitching furniture—he ripped forward, cleaving the mirror

into a million searing shards and falling where the clone was standing. The doppelganger skipped back, bringing his halberd to block Luth's next lunging swipe.

They darted around the centipede-sidewalks as if in a race, sparks blossoming in the shadows where their blades intersected, a flip met with a dash and a thrust parried with a slash. Luth reached for its legs and the clone answered with a falling heel, planting his chin on the cobbles with an eye-watering crack. A swooshing blade followed suit, crashing against bare rock and bloody spittle, Luth already tumbled out of the way. He pushed off a deft leg and plowed into the other's middle, knocking it flat on its back, but the clone's feet caught Luth by the belt and threw him up and over. The real Burmecian landed in a heap while his clone bounced back and snatched up its halberd.

The wind was knocked out of him and his palms burned with grit and glass, but he hadn't run out of steam yet. Luth clambered to his feet and swung his weapon at the nearest target: a crystal orb. It shattered, spraying a jet of caustic glitter into the clone's charge. The copy shrieked and pawed at its leaking eyes, pausing long enough for Luth's halberd to reach over and chop the imposter from

hip to rib. Its spine split like a straw, the blade passing so easily that Luth had to reel his weight back to keep from flying off his feet.

Without as much as a squeak, the apparition dissipated, leaving a sickly, grainy puddle at Luth's feet.

He almost didn't hear the groaning of the epitaph through the throbbing in his ears. In a snapping impulse Luth jumped high, climbing the thin air with all the sleek grace of an otter through water—it was nothing to a Burmecian, to a Dragon Knight, his right through race and birth, to jump like fleas off rats, higher than anyone—and brought the point of his halberd straight down on the monster's sloping skull.

The brewing glow in its closet drew closed, dead like nightfall, and the whole block toppled onto its backside before likewise turning into ash. Luth lost his pointed landing on the imploding monster and crumpled into a clumsy pile, his polearm pelting him across the muzzle. He sat in the sooty vestige of his foes, stunned and bruised while the dust settled and his mind caught up with his adrenaline.

Luth finally remembered to breathe, and gagged horribly.

Boss eventually emerged from seclusion, wearing a serious mask that didn't suit him. His expression cleared with a startled blink on finding his companion standing at limping attention, peppered with scrapes and debris.

"Yikes, kid, you okay?" He flicked Luth's ear, watching a funny powder wisp off its tip. "You look like hell."

"Yes," Luth puffed, trying not to sound as agitated or fatigued as he really was. "I'm fine. Did you get an answer to your question, sir?" he inquired, itching to change the subject.

"Huh?" Boss took a long second to process the query. "Oh…" his tone flattened, and his gaze drifted off to the side. "Not yet."

Gribbo thankfully didn't ask. It wasn't hard to pry a victory tale out of Luth once he was a little rested, though, and after censuring the Burmecian for not "saving his own ass" as advised, Boss managed to make a point of being proud of his 'rookie' ("You took down one of those by yourself? That's pretty hardcore, Lu. Remind me not to tangle with ya.")

They all camped in the *Good Graces* for the night, and flew back to Lindblum at daybreak. By the time Luth returned to his safe, cozy home-of-sorts, he was ready for a quiet, monster-free, drama-free day. He started to unlock his door when—

"What in Shiva's blue hell?!"

Luth knocked his forehead against the jamb with a rumpled frown. That was Boss, and he had to backpedal to the Genome's room to see what was amiss.

Boss was standing just inside his doorway, gaping at the plain cedar wardrobe across the room. Something—*someone* had painted in scrawling, frosty crimson letters across its doors:

TRAITOR

For a heady minute Luth stood in perverse awe of the vandalism, none of its implications sinking into his weary brain until Boss cleared his throat and spoke.

"Gee, Lu. I think someone's trying to tell me something."

A/N: It’s pronounced “all-the-air,” by the way. Huh, that actually makes an almost-sentence. Well, I guess you can say it however you like.

And now, a little bonus: my ever-helpful friends from icybrian(dot)com.

Myshu: Quick chat, invent a fast food franchise for future-FF9
Myshu: I need Boss to jump into the ball pit of its playground
Drew: McMoogles
Mozz: McFratleys
AgentTon: Rat Hair King.
AgentTon: If you don’t get half a pound of rat hair in your burger it’s probably not Burmecian.
Drew: Burger Eidolon
DK: The Flaming Amaburger
Mozz: Whatamoogle
Mozz: (run by Eiko)
Lina: I like Whatamoogle
Drew: Lindblum Fried Chocobo
Drew: Quinas.
Myshu: Drew wins again
Myshu: Though I don’t know if Quina would advocate fast food
DK: Quina advocates all food
DK: Quina eats shit that is still alive

DK: If Quina is turning down fast food that is because Quina doesn’t want to wait
Drew: Myshu it is run by Quinas unscrupulous descendents
Drew: who have perverted her original desire for delicious gourmet cuisine
Drew: all in search of the mighty GIL

Stay tuned for next time: Griffin Coral and monkey business.

8. Monkey Business

8. Monkey Business

Boss plowed through his wardrobe, his closet, his bed, beneath the bed—after fruitless huffing and puffing, he stood at a formidable conclusion.

“Bastards took it.”

“Took what, sir?”

“My stuff!” he wailed succinctly. “It—It’s… goddamnit, why take *that*? Of all the… argh!” In a conniption, he threw a pillow across the room, knocking over a lamp.

Luth was both impressed and alarmed; he’d never seen Boss lash out like that. “Sir, calm down. What did they take?”

He snapped his fingers and stormed out the door. “Let’s go, Lu. I’m getting to the bottom of this.”

“Should we call the police?” Luth offered bemusedly, barely stepping clear in time.

“Fuck the police,” he snapped, already three steps from the elevator.

At the back of the regular offices and across the hall from a janitor's closet was a quaint door marked "SECURITY." Boss practically punched it in, revealing a pint-sized room. One big desk sheltered a softly groaning computer box and its three small monitors. Lounging on the countertop and in the squat office chair were, to Boss's consternation, Pat and Berto. They were smoking, though the thick cloud they were camping in didn't smell of tobacco. Luth's scanty adult whiskers flared at the implications.

Boss's surprise wasn't reciprocated. Berto's chair squeaked as he turned a lazy semicircle to meet him, and Pat almost lolled off the desk, trying to wave and hold on to his stick at once. "'ey! Boss man… Locke," he hazarded, swerving a finger in Boss's vicinity.

"No," he censured them both, "What are you guys doing in here?"

Saving his breath, Pat offered a dopey grin and a smoke. Boss scowled at the stick for a minute before accepting it.

"Sir!" Luth disapproved.

Boss puffed out a smoke ring and shrugged. “What, you want a hit too?”

“No!” Luth exclaimed, indignant.

“This is weak shit, anyway.” Boss passed the stick back and laid a critical eye on Berto, who sat unperturbed in security threads, badge and all.

“Berto,” he barked.

The tapir blinked slowly, his eyes crossing back and forth. “Boss.”

“I thought I sent you to the mail room.”

“’m got promoteded back,” Berto rebutted in a slick slur.

“Who did that?”

“You did, Boss.”

Boss shared the tapir’s stupefied countenance for a moment before shaking it off. “O… kay.”

“So how’s it hangin’, Boss?” Pat asked fearlessly.

Boss crossed his arms and frowned. “Not so good. I was robbed last night.”

Berto grunted ambiguously. Pat slid backwards with a slow start. “Whoa, for serious? Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t even there. I’m pissed over what they nicked, though. It was all personal stuff from my room.”

“That sucks, man.”

“Yeah. That’s really weird, though. The vault’s downstairs, and the rest is in the bank. Why break into my room? Why take *that* stuff?”

“What exactly did they take, sir?” Luth tried again.

“I told you: personal stuff. Still, it’s the principle of it. I’ve got to set this straight.”

“Are you *sure* you don’t want me to call the police, sir?” he also tried again.

“Hell no. I’m taking care of this myself.” Boss smacked the back of the tapir’s chair. “Berto, fire up the surveillance recs. I wanna see who this bastard is that got into my room last night.”

While the security chief sluggishly complied, Luth attempted to glean their plan of action from

Boss. “Er, what exactly do you intend to do, sir? How are you going to track down the thief?”

“We’re gonna see what he looks like first, obviously, Lu. Don’t worry about the rest,” Boss answered with simple patience. Luth sighed, holding his piece.

The group intently studied the monitor with a fish-eyed display of the top floor—Luth could see his door in the bubble-horizon, and only a hint of Boss’s—the way into his office was the prominent focus. Berto’s thick fingers stumbled over the keys, jerking the video in and out of the past.

“Just fast-forward through last night, Berto,” Boss suggested, and in another minute the tapir had coordinated the thought.

“It doesn’t look like anyone came that way,” Luth was about to remark, when a blip appeared under the 3:12 AM timestamp. Boss had to lean over the computer and guide Berto through a halt and rewind. Everyone huddled a little closer to watch the evidence unfold in real time.

Luth tilted his head and blinked widely at the footage. Boss gawked flatly. Pat rolled his shoulders

and fell back to the wall, lighting another stick. “It’s just you, Boss.”

“The hell it is,” the Genome begged to differ, transfixed by the picture of *himself* walking down the hall and clean into his apartment. “Are you sure that’s last night?”

“Uhh…” Berto responded accurately.

“The date on the recording says so,” Luth confirmed.

“This is bullshit. I wasn’t here.”

“I know…” Luth concurred, at a loss. They were in the *Good Graces* at the time, a whole continent away. How was what they were watching possible?

“Then who the hell is *that*?” Boss raised an appalled voice, shaking an open fist at the screen.

“Uh… Are you sure that’s not you? Because I’m seein’ you. You’re right there.” Pat smudged his finger on the monitor, emphasizing his point.

“I’m—it’s—I can see that!” Boss sputtered, muddled and angry.

“Maybe,” Pat conjectured with patronizing grace, “You had a little too much to drink again last night,

and don’t remember—”

Boss shook his head, clearing it. “Look, I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing last night, and I was definitely *not here*. Lu can back me up. This guy’s an imposter!”

“He looks just like you, sir,” Luth played the equivocal angle. “I mean, same size, hair, clothes, tail…”

Boss set his hands on his hips and said peremptorily, “Of course he does; he’s a Genome—a smart one, from the looks of it.”

“If that’s it, then how the hell did he get a key to your room?” Pat smartly asked.

“I think you should reconsider locking your door at night, sir,” Luth provided a chiding answer.

“Damnit…” Boss turned and sped off before Luth or his coworkers knew what to think.

Luth followed Boss back to his office like an extra wheel, struggling to input some helpful suggestion or insight while the Genome paced his rug in twain. All of Luth’s thoughts were utterly

useless, and Boss was ignoring him, besides. He looked like a caged wildcat, tail whipping anything in range and gaze riveted to the floor, furiously contemplating his next move.

“Damnit…” he muttered for the tenth time, his words trailing off and evaporating over Luth’s head. “What are they going to do with…? How…? They couldn’t…”

“‘They’?” Luth pointed out, crossing his legs more comfortably on the sofa. “But there was only one person in that video, sir.”

Their one-way conversation was broken by some frantic scratching at the window. Luth jumped out of his seat—almost too hard—to pull back the curtain and look out.

At first, hectic glance the visitor resembled an exploding pigeon, a thrashing cloud of off-white fur and pink wings. It took both Luth and Boss a delayed moment to realize it was a moogle.

Boss stopped and stared at the apparition with blank amazement. “Holy shit, is that Arpy?”

The moogle threw itself bodily at the window, its tiny claws scrambling for purchase. “Let me in, you child-safe, plexiglass bastard!” he hoarsely wailed,

his balloon-nose groaning against the glass as he steadily slipped down.

Luth passed a bewildered glance across the room —Boss shrugged, clueless—before flipping the window's latch. Arpy whirled into the office, a puffy tumbleweed in a gale of feathers and city rubbish. Luth hastily shut the window after the moogle and watched him roll to a dizzy drop at Boss's feet.

The Genome cocked an amused grin. "Nice of you to stop by, Arpy, but we have, y'know… doors."

"Geez, I'm outta shape," the moogle panted before instantly composing himself, springing to his feet and shooting beady eyes and digits at his host. "Holy shit, Ultima, you big dumb cracker. The Black Griffin's coming for you. I came to warn your skinny punk ass."

He gave a perplexed start. "Griffin? What's he want?"

"To stick a knife in your throat, that's what! Pevy hired him to roast your monkey nuts over a spit."

Luth gaped. "What??"

Boss was reasonably vexed by the news. "The hell?! What for?"

The moogle choked on some flabbergasted invective and then began, “What’re you, blind and deaf on top of dumb, now? It’s all over the—”

Luth about jumped out of his anklets when the door blasted open with a heart-stopping kick, like the call of a shotgun. The three jerked in circles to face the intruder, who stood like an ogre in the shivering threshold, either reveling in his stock-still audience or sizing them up. When nothing stirred, he forced his deep, rusty voice to announce, “…Knock knock.”

It was just as he appeared in The Pen, Luth recalled—massive and lithe, livid of flesh, swathed in black and stitched with silver.

“What the—hey!” Boss protested, more irked than anything. “Oh, Berto is *so* fired.”

The hulk narrowed his coal leer on the Genome. “Ultima.”

Boss crossed his arms defiantly. “Griffin.”

Then on Luth. “…When’d you get a pet rat?”

Luth bristled, for one blind, crazy instant ready to tear into the offender, but Boss waved him down and

the good sense to stay quiet returned—that was what Arpy was doing, at any rate.

“Nice to see you too, Griffin,” Boss greeted with mock congeniality. “Here to get your teeth back?”

“I came to see if it was true. I know you’re a crazy son of a bitch, but I didn’t think you were *that* crazy.”

“What are you talking about?

“Hrmph. You’re kidding.”

“For once, no,” Boss retorted. “What the hell’s going on?”

Arpy fluttered in place. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, you blonde block of wood! Don Gator got the—”

“He’s dead,” Griffin rolled over him like a gravestone.

Luth gagged on his tongue in shock. “…What?” he surprised himself by speaking first—the others drowned in silence.

“Killed in his bed. The wife and kids, too,” Griffin blithely elaborated.

“Gator? And… Mrs. Gator…?” Luth’s voice wobbled piteously.

“Whole family taken out in six shots.”

Boss swallowed and questioned, “When did this happen?”

“Last night,” Arpy filled in. “It’s all over the goddamn TV, you clueless hacks.”

Boss numbly nodded towards the picture box in the corner. “…Lu, turn it on.”

A reporter flicked onto the screen, above a ticker relaying such important tid-bits as the temperature in Esto Gaza and the status of another labor strike in Alexandria. Luth suddenly couldn’t feel the fur on his face. He waited for someone to point her out—maybe some playful gibe from Boss—but no one said a word.

She was still lovely, he couldn’t help but note. She stood outside the gates of a willow-festooned estate, before a backdrop of police cars and huddled men in trench coats. Composure and microphone held steady, she conveniently iterated to the camera, “This is Julia Knickoff, reporting in front of the Gator residence. For those of you just joining us, we’re covering the gruesome murder of Pillis Gator

and his family right around midnight, Lindblum Median Time. Authorities have confirmed that the cause of death of all four family members was homicide, but will not at this time confirm or deny the involvement of the Red Angels, the gang still at large for the theft of the Falcon Claw, and now the royal jewel of Alexandria, the Silver Pendant."

"Whoa, the Silver Pendant's been swiped too?" Boss smacked his forehead. "Geez…"

Julia continued, "Gator's survivors have issued a brief statement saying they are outraged by this heinous crime, especially against such a prominent and highly respected member of the community."

Griffin snorted irreverently.

"They are resolved to find the party responsible for the death of Mr. Gator and his family at all costs."

Luth couldn't believe it. "Who would do such a thing? The Red Angels?"

"Yeah," Griffin said, his every word a beastly grumble, "That's where the press is placin' their bets. Cops don't really have a clue. I heard all about it from the underground."

“Man, the Gators and the Silver Pendant…” Boss slouched against his desk, shaking his head. “When it rains, it pours.”

Griffin fleered, inordinately pleased. “I’ve got even better news. Everyone in Gatortown thinks you did it.”

“What?!” Luth shrilled in tune with the others.

“What the hell makes them think that?” the defendant quietly roared.

“The guy at Don’s front gate says you were the last one there. Claims you said the password and everything.”

“That’s impossible,” ‘That’s bullshit,’ Luth and Boss exclaimed in tandem. The former shook his head insistently. “Sir and I weren’t anywhere near Lindblum last night.”

“Says you and your boss against Don’s security guard and a video camera.”

“They have me *on video*?” Boss’s pitch raised a notch.

“Yeah, saw it myself. It’s pretty blatant—ridiculous, really. I’m almost surprised the other bosses haven’t turned the tape over to the Regs, but

that’s not how justice works in Gatortown.” The black glint in his eye bounced between Arpy and Boss. “If you know what I mean.”

“Huh.” Boss sighed, ran a flustered hand through his hair and contemplated a pizza box on the floor for a minute. “So…” he eventually surmised, “I guess I’m not invited to the funeral.”

Arpy scoffed. “No shit!”

“Wait,” Luth spoke up, “That’s really, really impossible. Sir, do you think this has anything to do with what we just saw on that recording?”

Arpy screwed up a smirk. “What’re you giant freaks talking about?”

Boss explained, “The camera outside the door here shows me turning in at three in the morning last night, but like Lu was just saying, I wasn’t even in Lindblum at the time.”

“Huh. And the camera at Don’s shows you there at ten o’clock. Interesting setup,” Griffin remarked.

“Yeah, ain’t it.” Boss pitched Griffin a challenging glare. “You think I did it?”

Suddenly gazeless, The Black Griffin grimaced and shrugged ambivalently. “…I don’t really care.

That’s not my concern.”

“Then why are you here?”

“What’s left of Gator’s family is scrambling to keep control of Gatortown. Pevy and Leo are trying to put themselves in the Don’s seat, and Gator’s old hit-men are after your tail. Heh,” he chuckled darkly, “Pevy even hired me to take you out.”

Luth hadn’t unpacked yet—it was a long day that wouldn’t end—he still had his halberd strapped to his back, and in a blink it was aimed at Griffin’s throat. He wasn’t even thinking about it—it was a knee-jerk, an extension of his arm, some deep-rooted reflex he was too tired to reject or reconsider.

Arpy inflated like a spooked rooster. Griffin, too stoic for threats, merely hissed, his breath hotly ghosting over the dragon-blade. “…Your pet has teeth.”

“Whoa, Lu, stand down,” Boss coolly ordered. “He’s not serious. If he was gonna kill me, he wouldn’t waste so much time talking about it.”

Luth wasn’t reassured, especially when Griffin grinned and scratched his stubble. “I don’t know about that. I’ve never disappointed a client before. Wouldn’t be good for my reputation.”

“You big blue…” Arpy simmered, but tightened his tongue before any more spilled out. Luth’s halberd didn’t retreat from Griffin’s throat. Boss only crossed his arms and regarded the intruder with a lifted brow, waiting for his move.

“…But I guess I’ll pass,” Griffin folded, his meaty fingers wrapping around Luth’s weapon and carefully pushing it aside. Luth didn’t press it further. “It would be too easy like this. Not any fun. I’d much rather take you down on my own time.” He gave a nonchalant shrug. “Pevy’s a dick, anyway.”

“Gee,” Boss leveled with him, “I’m flattered that you think I’m so easy, but at least we can agree on Pevy. So, really, what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see the look on your face, mostly.”

Arpy spit at him. “Show’s over then, asshole. Go home and suck your mother’s big, scaly, cold-blooded dick.”

“Shut up, moogle,” he growled, little more than irritated.

Luth stood back and tempered himself with a deep breath. “What about Don Gator’s hit-men?” he wondered.

Boss clicked his tongue. “Eh, I wouldn’t worry about the old man’s band of slackies, Lu.”

Arpy leapt onto the desk and skid over a stack of papers to pull on Boss’s hair. “For the love of baked bat shit, I would! Have you gotten a good look at those guys lately? They’re huge, like gorillas. They could crush your chimp head like a grape.”

Boss snickered and batted him off. “So? The bigger they are, the harder they fall. I’ve taken down bigger punks than that.”

Griffin snorted again. “There’s six of them.”

“That’ll make it more challenging.”

“They also have guns.”

“I guess I’m in a bit of trouble, then,” Boss lightly conceded.

Luth wrung his hands around the shaft of his halberd. “Sir, what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know about the rest of you guys, but I’m getting the hell out of dodge.” Boss punctuated the thought by getting up and heading for the door.

As he pushed past Griffin, he got a parting sneer. “You’re running, eh?”

Boss paused to throw back a salty look. “No, I’ll do better than that. I’m going to hunt these bastards down. Trying to kill me? Big deal; take a number. Framing me for murder? That’s a new one, but I’ve scraped by worse. Impersonating me and stealing my shit out from under my bed? Hell no. Nobody’s getting away with that.”

“Wait, sir,” Luth tried to reel him back, “You’re saying ‘those people’ again. What do you think ‘they’ want?”

“Oh, I’m getting a fair idea of what they want. They want the Jewels, and they want me and Don out of the way while they’re at it. I just don’t know why, yet.”

“But sir, how are you sure that the person—people—whoever after the Jewels are the same ones framing you for Don’s murder? And the same ones who broke into your room? Maybe they’re not related.”

“I’m sure, Lu, because that was what was stolen from my room: the Memory Earring.”

The name jogged Luth’s textbook memory. He could practically hear his ancestor ruminating, *’It was one of the Jewels: Madain Sari’s token. It was*

Eiko's to safeguard, and she wore it as an earring, saying it reminded her of home. If only the Desert Star evoked such fond memories in myself…'

Arpy dropped the stapler and pen he was attempting to juggle. "Whoa, you've got the Memory Earring?"

Luth was duly amazed. "I didn't know that was in your possession, sir."

"Not anymore, goddamnit!" Boss stressed, swinging his hands in frustration. "That's what I'm going to fix!"

"Interesting." Griffin planted himself in Boss's way, like a lumbering wall. "I'm coming with you."

"Hah," Boss laughed at him outright. "At what price?"

"No charge. If these guys are really that good, I want a shot at 'em. You can't hog all the fun."

"Suit yourself," Boss granted him that. "Lu, you in?"

"Where are we going, sir?" was all he needed to know.

"Burmecia."

“Burmecia?” Luth tried not to gag on the word, but it was impossible to hide the white flash of trepidation in his eyes.

Boss stepped closer, bearing a serious entreaty on him. “I want to catch these guys, Lu, and the best way to catch ’em is in the act. If they’re collecting Jewels, then Burmecia’s the only place they have left to go. I’m going to meet ’em there, kick their asses, get my stuff back *and* recover the rest of the Jewels. You’re trying to be a Dragon Knight, aren’t you? Isn’t the Desert Star Burmecia’s national treasure? Don’t you want to protect it? I can go without you, but I’d really like your help for this one. Are you in or not?”

It was a bad idea, but the best one. He wasn’t going to talk Boss out of it, and he definitely wasn’t going to stay behind, cowardly and wrong against his fear of failure and the bitter truth. The Burmecian—for he was, and he wouldn’t deny it, especially not in front of witnesses like these, who thought his people were just “some rats,” useless pests—fastened his polearm to his back and stood salute-ready. “Yes, sir. I’ll do it for Burmecia.”

Boss clapped him on the arm. “Always a good sport, Lu. Let’s—oh wait, wait.” He held up his

hands, arresting the room. “We can’t go yet.”

The others held their breaths and brows high for Boss while he rummaged through his desk drawers, at length procuring a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He flashed them triumphantly before pocketing them and marching out the door. “Okay, now we can go.”

Luth promptly followed, and then Griffin in his own looming pursuit.

“You’re all crazy bastards!” Arpy shouted in their wake. He stewed by his lonesome for a moment, muttering over ‘suicidal humans’ and “stupid staplers,” before abruptly picking himself up and skipping after the crackpot party. “…Hey, wait for me!”

9. Desert Rain

9. Desert Rain

They took the next available company flight: a small cargo ship carrying personal packages. Luth caught a nap below deck while he still could; he was sure he'd need the rest for the immediate future. He was almost too anxious over his premature homecoming to sleep, but some accumulated exhaustion from the previous day took care of him.

He didn't know how the others bid their time, but when he stepped out to the deck to search for his comrades, a chilly blue dusk was closing over the swarming red clouds below. He found Boss sitting on a bench looking off the stern, where the ship's cabin broke the wind and let him smoke a cigarette in peace—an ash tray was balanced on the thin armrest.

Boss acknowledged him with a small nod, and Luth took a seat next to him. He said nothing for a while, watching Boss unfurl and readjust the white bandages on his wrists and elbows.

"Why do you wear those all the time, sir?"

“What, these?” he replied around his cigarette, using his free hands to close the straps in a tight knot. “I need a reason? Fashion rarely makes sense, Lu.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Steering towards the matter at hand, Luth pried, “So, sir, how did you acquire the Memory Earring? Was it an heirloom?”

“Uh… yeah, sort of. I don’t really talk about that kinda stuff.”

“Oh. Okay, sir.” Luth knew how to steer around Boss’s walls by now. “You don’t think Griffin or Arpy will try to take it once you find it again, do you?”

Boss gave a cynical snicker. “You’re suspicious of ’em, eh?”

“Well, Griffin *was* hired to kill you, sir,” he reminded matter-of-factly.

“Ah, I wouldn’t worry about that. Him and Arpy, they’ve got their own motives—weird, but harmless. That’s just the kind of people they are. I don’t think they’ll pull any fast ones on us.”

“Hmm,” Luth conceded, “We should worry more about the Red Angels, right, sir?”

“That’s right, Lu.” He drummed his feet restively on the deck and reached for another cigarette. “That’s absolutely right.”

Luth checked both ways for privacy before phrasing his next query. “Um, about Griffin, can I ask how you know him? I remember you fighting him in The Pen that time we went to Gatortown. Does he carry some kind of grudge against you? Who exactly is this man?”

Boss shrugged indifferently. “Griffin? He’s a Coral, a regular drifter.”

“Coral?” Luth raised a suspecting brow. “As in __”

“Yeah, the same,” Boss took the reins. “Hangs around the underground, takes odd jobs for the highest bidder—doesn’t really pay allegiance to any of the bosses. I figure the only reason he’s lived so long is because he does a real good job looking out for himself. In a funny way, he and I go back a ways—that’s how I knew he really wasn’t going to kill me back there.”

“Oh.” Luth sat back and scratched his left ear contemplatively. “I see, sir. I think.”

“It’s okay,” Boss relieved him, “I never really got it, either.”

They sat for a quiet spell, watching the sun dissolve into mountains and clouds. Luth knew if he looked around to the bow of the ship, he’d see the thunderheads over the Daines-horse Basin. A homecoming… He never expected it to be under circumstances like these.

He tried not to think of his family, especially their reaction to his… situation, but his mind wouldn’t stray to any more pleasant matters. “I can’t believe Don Gator is dead,” he murmured.

“Why? It’s not gettin’ to you, is it?” Boss drilled him. “You barely knew the man.”

“Well no, sir, but it’s still a shock. And he seemed like a nice man. I mean, despite the… you know.”

“Yeah, I know. Despite all the bullshit, he was a good man.”

“He wasn’t as bad as I thought he would be—for the Don, I mean. He seemed like just a regular, nice man.” Luth rubbed the back of his neck, fidgeting through his lame lament. “…Called me ‘kiddo,’ though.”

“Heheh, what, you don’t like that?”

“A bit of a pet peeve, sir.”

Boss slung him a quizzical look. “I call you ‘kid’ all the time. Why haven’t you said anything?”

Luth, sincerely stumped, mutely worked his jaw around a solution. At length, he concluded, “I guess I don’t mind it so much coming from you, sir.”

“Huh.” An odd grin sprouted around Boss’s leer, making Luth incredibly self-conscious in a short minute.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “…What?”

Boss shook his gaze off, the smile still lingering. “Nothing, nothing…”

Luth returned a small, taut frown. He liked Boss, but sometimes his cryptic manners were annoying. He got around them by changing the subject again. “Who would do such a thing, though? To Don’s family, I mean.”

“Apparently people who want me out of the way as well,” Boss answered soberly.

“Do you really think Don’s survivors and the other bosses are going to go after you?”

“You heard what Griffin and Arpy said. If they really think I killed Don, I’m sure they will.”

“I don’t know, sir. They don’t have a lot of evidence. That Genome could have been anyone.”

“Lu,” Boss lectured, “This is an upheaval of everything that’s made Gatortown tick for the past five generations. You remember that news babe talking about Don’s ‘survivors’? There are no survivors. There’s Don’s, like, two withered old aunts, his dead wife, his dead *kids*, Leo, Armond, Pevy, me and Arpy. That’s it. There’s going to be a power struggle like you wouldn’t believe, and the sooner the bosses take care of old business—i.e, avenging the late Don’s untimely death—the better. They’re not going to give two flying shits about evidence. You don’t fuck with the Don—or even look like you’re fucking with the Don—and live. I’m just a big goddamn target now.”

“Oh.” It wasn’t something Luth wanted to believe; it all seemed too sudden, too… rash. “That’s just so terrible, though—I mean, it’s not even giving you a chance.”

Boss snorted. “Welcome to Gatortown. That’s just the way it is.”

“What’s the world coming to, sir?” Luth tried to sound sympathetic, but only sounded like his parents. He shuddered, repulsed. He didn’t want to sound like that. It wasn’t him.

“Nothing, Lu,” Boss replied too fast, too harsh. ‘Not a goddamn thing. Nothing ever changes,’ he railed, his tone impossibly bitter, impossibly… old. “…Hrmn.” He closed his eyes, tilted his head back and gave a smoldering sigh, sagging into the bench. “Too long, too long… Today’s not a good day to die.”

“Sir?” Luth tested, feeling like an outsider again.

He sat up, met Luth’s look and spoke frankly, “I said I’m not gonna lie to you, Lu. Things are gonna get a lot more dangerous from here on out. It’s not gonna be safe to hang around me much anymore. I’d really rather not get you caught up in all this crap. If you want to bail out, now’s the best time. I don’t want to have to give your mother any bad news, you understand?”

Luth wanted to understand, but all he could think of were someone else’s memories, carefully etched into a missing book.

“I’m coming with you,” he said without a second thought—he never thought anything through, the fool.

“No. This doesn’t concern you,” I tried to stop him. Burmecia was going to be a war zone, and I couldn’t drag anyone else into it in good conscience.

“What’s this, I’m a stranger all of a sudden!? I’m not gonna sit back and watch your home get destroyed, alright?”

Then again, he was always a very persuasive fool. “…Thank you…”

“Yes, sir,” Luth remembered himself, “But I won’t leave you, especially not now. I want to help. I’m with you.”

Boss softened with a grateful smile. “Aww, Lu…” He started to reach towards Luth, but his hand lost its resolve half way, settling into the bench-space between him. “…Thanks. This means a lot to me.”

“I just wish I knew how to help, sir. Isn’t there anything we can do about Gatortown?”

“I don’t know,” Boss admitted, smashing his cigarette and standing up. “But I’m gonna worry

about first thing's first: I'm going to get my shit back."

Luth followed Boss around the deck and helped him sniff out Griffin ("You'd think a guy that big wouldn't be hard to find," Boss remarked after circling the cabin twice.)

They eventually found him below deck, leaning against the door of a broom closet and indolently waving Arpy's cigar smoke out of his face. When Luth pointed out the "No Smoking" sign on the opposite wall, he only got a humored smirk from Boss and cold stares from the rest.

"Hey dickwads," Arpy greeted. "We were just rappin' it up about these Red Wings. Y'know, strategizin'."

"Red Angels," Griffin grumbled.

"Whatever, you goth faggot," Arpy spat, and then turned to Boss. "You losers cooked up any ideas yet?"

Boss merely shrugged as Luth chipped in, "The Red Angels must have incredible skills. They infiltrated Lindblum Grand Castle, Alexandria Castle, Don Gator's house, and then our central branch."

Boss nodded. “Yeah, and that’s another thing that’s really bothering me. That guy we saw on the camera, he’s someone who, A: knew I had the Memory Earring—and I can count the number of people who knew I had that Jewel on one hand—and B: knew I wasn’t in last night, because I would’ve kicked his tail clean off his ass if I was.”

Speaking of tails, Luth couldn’t help but cite, “And he’s a Genome.”

“Yeah…” Boss crossed his arms pensively. “… and that.”

It finally occurred to Luth that, if these Red Angels were really Genomes, Boss would be going against his own kind. Luth tried to imagine himself in the same position, and couldn’t untangle the knot in his stomach. “Are you going to be okay with this, sir? I mean, if the Red Angels are Genomes…”

His tail thumped once against the wall, his expression inscrutable. “…Won’t make a difference,” he decided quietly.

“Better not,” Griffin piped up, “I’m not going home without some blood.”

While Luth tried to figure how to safely criticize Griffin’s lack of tact, Boss sighed gustily and ran a

hand through his hair. “Geez… This is all fuckin’ great. Now these bastards have three of ’em.”

“You mean the Jewels, sir?”

“No, Griffin’s circus-freak balls. Yes the Jewels, ratshit,” Arpy scathed. Luth redirected his glower towards the moogle. Griffin flashed a switchblade and proceeded to sharpen it off a throwing knife he had sheathed at his belt.

“Yeah,” Boss confirmed, ignoring them, “I don’t wanna think about what’ll happen if they get all four.”

“Why? What *will* happen, sir?”

Boss briskly smacked his arm. “Damn, Lu, I thought you’ve been doing your homework. Letting all the Jewels fall into the hands of some crazy murderers? It’ll be the Mist War all over again, is what.”

The fur along Luth’s spine roiled as he realized that Boss was right. Queen Brahne’s struggle to obtain the Jewels was precisely what initiated the Mist War, and the tragedies of Burmecia, Cleyra, Lindblum…

Boss proffered a wan smile. “But let’s not worry about it. We’re not going to let that happen.”

It was weak consolation, but it strengthened Luth’s morale nonetheless. Despite the nagging stagnancy of peace and hunger for battle’s glory that drove his knightly training and haunted his Crescent blood, Luth didn’t want another Mist War. He wasn’t like Griffin—he didn’t want “blood.” He was going to protect people—and Boss…

“Right, sir. We won’t.”

Arpy and Griffin harrumphed in unison, and the former took a thick drag off his cigar.

“Say, Griffin,” Boss accosted him, “You said you got your scoop on Don’s murder from the underground. Can you tell me everything you heard? We need some clues, here.”

The brute shrugged. “Not much to tell. Don’s watchman saw you—”

“A Genome,” Luth touchily corrected.

“Guard saw *someone*,” Griffin resumed with a petulant curl to his lip, “Walk in the front gate last night, and that was it. When Gator’s ride showed up

the next morning, he found everyone inside dead. Called the cops, whole big deal."

"Wait," Luth puzzled, "Someone walked in, but never walked out?"

"Seems so. Cops'll never know, though. Bosses have the watchman's security tape. The crime scene is the craziest part—looks like some kind of fucked-up ritual sacrifice. The two kids out in the hall on their knees, bullets through the backs of their heads. Gator and the missus done just the same, laid out next to the kids to make a big cross shape. Then somebody took the time to draw some big-ass circles and symbols around the bodies in their blood, and then wrote out 'INFIDEL' on the wall above Don's bed."

"Infidel?" Boss rubbed his chin and dropped his gaze to the floor, a disquieted streak possessing him.

"That's like what we saw in your room, sir," Luth noted.

"Saw what in his room?" Arpy asked.

"It was in red paint—at least, I hope to gods it was red paint," Luth backtracked, his expression contorting with belated horror. He then shook his

head, realigned his ears and moved on. “The word ‘TRAITOR’ had been written on Sir’s furniture.”

“Traitor?” The moogle’s pom-pom twirled. “Against *what*?”

Boss looked vacant—he didn’t say a thing.

“The same thing you can be an infidel against,” the contumelious Griffin supplied.

Luth was flustered by the evidence—and lack thereof. “This doesn’t help us. All this is telling us is that the people we’re dealing with are… they’re some kind of…” he floundered around the right word.

“Sickos,” Arpy quipped. ‘Some real crazy bastards.’ He directed his cigar at Boss. “No offense, monkey boy, but I wouldn’t expect anything less from a bunch of Genomes. Fuckin’ loony crackpots, the lot of ’em.”

“We’re not yet certain that the Red Angels are Genomes—”

“It was *your* theory, rat.”

“I know, but I’m just saying we don’t know—”

“Fuck us with an ant-covered stick, we don’t know our dicks from our asses here.”

“If the rat would pull his head out of the monkey’s, it would be a good start.”

“What?! How dare you—”

“Lu is right; this isn’t getting us anywhere,” Boss intervened, his voice subdued, and the squabble settled to listen. ‘We’re already within Burmecia’s borders—we’re going to arrive in the capital soon. We should get ready.’ He rubbed his nose, a smirk lighting his features. “I have a plan to help us get inside the palace.”

Luth had a few reservations about their mission. Boss wasn’t a very… clandestine character, Arpy was as a subtle as a foghorn, and Griffin was a stalking, brooding wild card.

But Boss had a *plan*, and that was supposed to make it all better.

Apparently the entire plan hinged on Luth being able to distract the guard at the southeast gate of Burmecia Palace so the others could climb one of the giant valkyrie statues and sneak into the upper

bailey. Luth wasn't keen on deceiving one of his brothers-in-arms, but at Boss's insistence he couldn't say no.

As far as that part of the plan went, he was lucky.

"Luth? Is that you??"

The night watchman was Petrov, an old classmate of Luth's, and it only took moments to lose him in nostalgic conversation. It took all of Luth's willpower to not look in his comrades' direction and give them away while egging Petrov on with monosyllabic comments.

"Haha, do you still have that rag-doll my sister gave you? The one we let Bruiser chew on? Man, we put that dog down last year, did you know? Heartworms."

Boss was first to the top, scaling the intricate stone goliath like a squirrel up a tree, his tail a fluttering wisp in his wake.

"Um, yeah, that's…"

"Heh, look at us shootin' the breeze like this. I'm supposed to be on duty, eheh. Hell, though, I've still got four hours left on this shift. I'm gonna go crazy. So what brings you back to Burmecia, anyway? I

heard you took off on some crazy old quest. Did you hear about what happened to the Jewels?"

"Well, I—"

"That's some crazy stuff. Now we've gotta double our patrols to keep an eye on the Desert Star. I swear, it's so ridiculous, we've turned 24/7 watches into 48/7, y'know what I mean? Hahaha. Even 'uper thinks we should just lock the damn thing up, but the King won't hear it. Keeps saying, 'Burmecia won't flinch in the face of terrorism,' or some high and mighty bullshit like that. His royal dumb ass wants to leave it on a silver platter in the middle of the great outdoors for the Red Angels to snatch up like candy. Stupid, stupid. Heh, of course don't tell 'uper I said any of that. That'll be a week in the ice box, hoo boy."

"So it's still in the upper bailey?"

"The Jewel? Yeah, on display like a baboon's ass. Stupid, I'm tellin' ya."

Griffin skulked after him, more like a sloth, opting to be careful over quick. He'd occasionally swat at the moogle trying to hitch a ride on his shoulder with a huge hand, their antics caught in flickers of pale blue and cursing white.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Petrov waved a hand in front of Luth’s nose. “You look spaced out.”

Luth snapped back to his task with a guilty grimace, his ears pressed low. “Nothing! I’m…”

At last, Griffin and Arpy cleared the curtain wall. Petrov threw a glance around the statue Luth was fixated on and, seeing nothing of interest, shrugged at him. “You tired? I guess it’s pretty late, especially if you just got back. We’ve got some bunks open in the barracks if you want to crash for the night. I promise I won’t tell ’uper.”

Luth deflated with relief. He didn’t even have to ask. “Yes, that would be great, thank you.”

The clock was pushing midnight by the time Luth worked up the nerve to roll out of his bunk and slink out the narrow casement windows. The coast was clear—the barracks were largely empty, its scanty occupants snoring into pillows and helmets. He squeaked through the glass panes, flinching when his halberd clumsily scraped the glass, but fortunately nobody sounded the alarm.

He scurried up a drainpipe and hoisted himself onto the roof, where the rest of the palace unfolded before him. It was a gothic playground of listing grey spires, creeping ivy and looping wall walks. He remembered his early days of training, scampering across the shingles and rafters with other daredevil students, never afraid of heights and always being told to, “Get down from there before you break your neck. If you like jumping so much, you’ll hit the floor and do me fifty skipping-jacks right now.”

Those were the days, ones bathed in cloudy sunlight and rose-tinted invincibility. It was all safe and natural. Now it was night, heavy and dripping and creaking with too many unseen things his memories couldn’t touch, and he didn’t want to play anymore.

The rain was the best part, always a mixed blessing. Burmecia was called the “Realm of Eternal Rain,” which was a slight misnomer. It did rain every day, but not perpetually, and fits of sun and moonlight would occasionally grace the puddled city. Luth wished for such a reprieve as he scrambled over the slick rooftops, nonetheless grateful for the way the rain’s pattering static drowned his tracks.

The dark and the downpour disoriented him, but he eventually reached the upper bailey. He perched behind the outstretched wing of a gargoyle and surveyed the open courtyard below.

The upper bailey was a simple oval room, smaller than the lower bailey, which housed most palace traffic, and larger than the king's bailey, where official business took place. It was ornamental grounds, more for tourists these days than anyone else. A long ago struggle sheered away the roof, and gutters had since been trenched along the sidewalk to keep the bailey from turning into a pool. On the ground, in watered-down tile mosaic, were the crests of the three founding tribes of Burmecia, stationed between massive stone likenesses of their chieftains: the sitting Gaul, the kneeling Clayan, and the standing Burma.

A hallway intersected the south end, and two guards idly marched between its exits. Their long-nosed helmets fended off the rain and any glimpse of Luth, high overhead. Hot white lamps beamed criss-crosses through the draping rain, down from the broken rafters and onto the floor. In the center, within a small, simple shrine, dwelled the Desert Star.

Luth was familiar with this Jewel piece's history. Centuries ago, the Cleyrans took the Desert Star when they separated from Burmecia, using its magic to build their isolated kingdom. The Jewel was lost when the Alexandrians sacked and razed Cleyra under Queen Brahne, but then it was returned to the Burmecians under Queen Garnet. It remained in Burmecia Palace ever since, on display in the upper bailey for the people to admire and reflect on their sacred heritage.

Considering his vantage point, far too close far too easily, he was beginning to agree with Petrov: leaving the Jewel there was *stupid*, *stupid*.

He tried to peer into the lofty gallery circling the bailey, but it was too hard to see through the rain, spotlights and shadows. With any luck, Boss and the others would be hiding there as planned, and not caught and locked up in the dungeon. Luth threw his feet over the side of the roof, shuffled down a gutter and blindly swung through a pair of life-size monk statues, praying not to crash into anything or anyone unexpected.

A rat squealed when he landed on its tail, and Luth rolled aside, letting it flee into the cracks in the leaky masonry. The gallery was otherwise narrow

and vacant. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim, quiet alcove and then moved in a lap around the bailey, finally encountering his friends on the opposite end.

“Hey Lu, you made it,” the Boss-shaped shadow welcomed him.

Griffin sounded low and distant, like thunder. “I thought I smelled wet rat.”

Luth hummed a growling note, wrung some water out of the skirt of his tunic and stared at the shrine on the ground. “So nothing’s happened so far?”

Arpy swayed on his moogle pin-feet and reported, “Nothin’. Damp, quiet and stinky as a tomb in a sewer.”

They waited through two more hours of nothing.

Boss was sitting against the far wall and eating from a miniature can of fruit cocktail, something picked up at a truck stop—the others forbid him to smoke, lest even a burning ember give them away. He grumbled, “Bullshit,” but relented. Griffin was back to sharpening his blades, their subtle *shing-*

shing noises blending in with the drum of rain. Arpy was making tiny *meep-meep* chirps as he snored.

Luth sat tightly on his haunches and looked out into the courtyard, too intent at his watch for hunger or fatigue to distract him. He fought to suppress a yawn as he started to question their agenda, however. “I’m not sure how necessary this is, sir. These parts of the palace are always well guarded. My friend Petrov was just telling me how they’ve doubled the night watch.”

Even as he said those words, he didn’t trust them. He didn’t forget himself calling the palace guard “decorations,” nor how easy it was for the Red Angels to compromise the security of Lindblum Grand Castle, a veritable fortress of the ages. That wasn’t even to mention how easy it was for *them* to —

“And look how we walked right in,” Boss validated his thoughts around a mouthful of diced fruit. He then griped into the bottom of the can, “These things are always ninety percent pears and ten percent all the good stuff. I think I saw *one* cherry. What a rip-off.”

He slurped the last of the cocktail syrup and then chucked the can aside. Luth sighed, scooted away

from the edge, plopped down and flexed his sore calves.

“You seem to know the palace pretty well, sir,” he remarked, “You knew exactly how to get up here. Have you been here before?”

He shrugged. “Eh, it’s been a while.”

“Oh. Uh, sir, I’ve been thinking…”

Boss lamely saluted. “Keep on truckin’, Lu.”

Luth finished, undaunted, “If the Red Angels do show up, how are we going to go about stopping them?”

“Any way possible,” he simply replied.

Arpy snorted, apparently not as asleep as Luth thought. “Way to think this plan through, dillhole.”

“Even if we have to kill them?” Luth pursued.

“That is a distinct possibility, Lu. I’d rather not, though. Hard to get information off a dead body, if you know what I mean.”

Arpy shot a squished glare at the slouching thug in the background. “You heard him, Griffin.”

“Hrmph.”

Boss stretched and yawned like a boar. “Sooonuvabiiiiiitch. I’m so bored I could shoot myself. Hey Griffin, you packin’ heat?”

Luth frowned in poor humor. “Please don’t, sir. I’d rather the guards not overhear.”

“Bitch, please,” Boss refuted, “You can’t hear your own piss for all this rain. I bet I could pull my pants down and wave my dick at them and they wouldn’t even look up. Here, I’ll show you.”

To Luth’s chagrin, Boss got up, stepped to the rim of the gallery, unzipped and proceed to relieve himself off the edge. “Heeeeey, get a load of this, you lazy rat bastards!” he broadcasted over the lot, his voice bouncing off the wet bricks and fizzling out in the rain.

“Sir!! What are you doing?!” Luth and Arpy sprang at him at once, yanking him off the edge and back into the seclusion.

“Hey hey hey, I hadn’t finished,” Boss whined as he readjusted his pants and his bearings.

“Are you terminally retarded??” the moogle scolded him.

As if in response, Boss belched. The others stared hard as he grimaced at himself. “…What the hell was that? Definitely not peaches.”

It was almost three in the morning.

“My house is a few blocks from here,” Luth sullenly noted, breaking the wicked monotony.

“Really?” Boss spoke up. “Is that where your folks live? What’re they like? I don’t think I ever met your mother. Celia, right?”

“Yes, sir. My mother, she’s… she’s been good to me. She’s always been very proper. A little impatient, though. I’m an only child, so she put a lot of expectations on me.”

“So you ran away.”

“…Actually, that was my father, but… it wouldn’t be kind to speak of him,” he prudently stopped.

“Haha,” Boss chuckled softly, “Ah, Lu. You’re all right. You’re all right.”

Luth tipped a puzzled glance at him, wondering what he meant. After a moment he gave up and asked, “What about your mother, sir? Don said she was a very nice lady. Wasn’t her name Meridia?” He checked himself two sentences too late, an apologetic hand flying up to his face. “Oh… I’m sorry to hear she died. Forgive my thoughtlessness, sir.”

“…Yeah.” Boss bowed his head, and that was that.

Arpy announced a quarter ’til four (Luth was surprised to learn he was wearing a microwatch under all that fur). Luth could swear he heard *Griffin* snoring.

Boss, at the end of his rope, found his empty can of fruit cocktail and plunked it down into the courtyard to, “see if they’re still awake down there.” Luth was about to chastise him *again* when the can’s bouncing clatter was snuffed out with a wisp. He jerked forward and leaned over the edge to hunt down its resting place.

“What the hell?” Boss squinted at the can, which had been nailed to the bricks with a…

“Is that a *shuriken*?” Luth couldn’t believe his eyes.

As Boss intended, the two guards were roused. “What was tha—”

thunk, thunk.

Two black blurs arrowed through the night. “Grrgh!” One toppled to the ground after the other, clutching their throats.

Arpy rolled to his feet, suddenly wide awake. “Holy shit!”

Luth could feel the weight of Griffin’s *shadow* creeping over him. “They’re here,” he deadpanned.

The Burmecian gaped at the swift demise of his countrymen. “No!!” He was flying before anyone could stop him, halberd cutting a swath through the rain before he even touched ground, two stories below.

Boss hollered after him, “Lu! Don’t just jump down—” Realizing it was a futile gesture, he rallied the others with a wave. “Com’on, let’s move!”

Luth held low to the ground, his eyes everywhere, wide like a doe and keen like a cat. His heart was racing, his muscles were frozen and his

breath was whispering a riot, assailed from all sides, the rain steaming away and it's a clear day, bright and ready—*where are you come out now I'll show you*—

He caught a flitting wrist—there, up high, *plain like the sun I see you*—and darted out of the way of another flurry, one, two, three, four, five shots, the little ninja stars sticking in the floor in a skeletal Luth after-image. He flipped back, another coming from another way, and then he saw the second, and then another wisp and he saw the third, the fourth—one more time—a *fifth*, and they stopped when Luth did, perhaps out of things to throw, or simply amused by his dexterity.

The rest of the party clambered down Clayan's broad armor and rushed across the floor, quickly catching up to Luth.

Arpy stumbled over the garden of pointy things in the ground, cursing, "Holy shitole on crackers, this is a goddamn death pit!"

Boss spun in circles, one of his daggers bared. "Where are they??"

Luth pointed into the soaked, jagged rafters. "Up there, sir. Five of them."

“They’re coming down,” Griffin observed.

Just as said, five ink-clad figures tossed down ropes and rappelled to solid ground, surrounding the group in a perfect pentagon.

“Get around the shrine,” Luth ordered, not even thinking twice about it. “Don’t let them get to it.”

“Good thinkin’, Lu,” Boss discreetly agreed, and altogether the four circled the Desert Star’s booth with wary paces.

“The fuck am I doin’ here? I’m a goddamn moogle. What am I gonna do, *tap-dance* these motherfuckers away? I shoulda stayed home,” Arpy complained in vain hindsight as he stood his post.

“Suck it up,” Griffin snubbed him. He turned towards the nearest ninja with feet braced wide, one hand around his throwing knife and the other tucked into a back pocket.

They were all black—black cargo pants, sleeved shirts, boots, ski masks. The lethal clicks of switchblades were heard through the dying drizzle as they encroached in slow, deliberate steps.

“You’ll never have the Desert Star!” Boss hollered defiantly, his focus ticking between his

multiple foes, his outnumbered friends and the precious Jewel at his back. His tail corkscrewed nervously around his ankles.

“I can smell your fear, you Gaian dogs,” one of them spoke. On cue the advancers halted, except the one, who tread brazenly ahead.

“What did you say?!” Boss fired back, trying to glimpse the speaker without taking both eyes off the ninja in front of him.

He was dead ahead of Luth. The Burmecian squeezed the shaft of his halberd and growled menacingly, “Not one step closer.”

The leader paused, chortled and concentrated an icy gaze on Boss. “Well, if it isn’t the traitor and his pack of lowly mutts.”

“I’m nobody’s dog,” issued Griffin’s feral retort.

“Speak for yourself, you cracked egg crazy bitch ninja muthafucker!” Arpy barked. “Why don’t you call off the smoke and mirrors and face us like a man?”

“Yeah,” Boss backed them up, “I don’t know what you’re on, but you’re all just a bunch of

common thieves—and believe me, I don't say that lightly."

"With pleasure," the leader sang, his voice like something on a phonograph—golden old, rich and heady, as clever and dangerous as a dragon. He peeled off his mask, revealing a mop of stringy-damp, muddy rud hair and crystal-sharp eyes. His build was tall and lean, and his face the same, with craggy ruts around his eyes and jaw where his age nibbled at his visage—a man with an impeccably strong aura of anger, madness and… something Luth couldn't look at straight. Something wrong.

"I remember you!" Luth exclaimed, surprised. "You're Maroon. I saw you at Don's party."

"Hey, that's right," Arpy chimed in, "You're Pevy's new right-hand bitch."

"So that means Pevy is behind all this?" Luth speculated aloud.

"I'm gonna kill 'im!" Boss fumed.

Maroon threw his head back in a short burst of laughter. "Hah! Pevy, that sniveling tool? Don't give him so much credit. He's just another stepping-stone for us—one that has tragically outlasted its use. We don't need Gatortown or its cockroaches anymore."

“What is it you people want?” Boss interrogated. “Why are you after the Jewels?”

Maroon reached behind his head and unsheathed a scimitar. “You’re hardly in a position to ask questions. And how do you plan to stop me, anyway? Are you going to kill us? It’s hard to get information off a dead body, isn’t it, *Althier*?” he spat the name like venom.

“What?!” Boss’s eyes widened, his hackles raised with a flash of wild indignation. “How do you—”

Maroon gave a disgusted snarl. “You ugly imposter. Traitor. You don’t deserve that name.” He pointed his blade at Luth’s side, where the Burmecian’s travel pack rested off his shoulder. “By the way, I have to thank your little pet for showing us the way. It would have been so much more difficult to find our way around this rat-hole without him. In fact, I dare say this wonderful reunion wouldn’t have been possible without his help.”

“What?!” Luth yelped, taken aback. “There’s no way I’d help you!”

“Goddamnit,” Griffin uttered, getting to the point before the others. “You’ve been bugged, you idiot.”

“Bugged?!” Luth echoed, a free hand jumping to his pack. How in the world would he—

I remember you from Don’s party.
“I believe you dropped this.”
“Huh? Oh! So I did. Thank you.”

Luth stammered, the horrible truth confounding him, “That—that was two weeks ago, and you—it was—*all that time*?”

Maroon regarded his consternation with mirth. “Haha, oh, you poor, dumb little rat. Don’t feel too bad. None of you infidels are going to last long enough to feel remorse.”

“We’ll see about that, you bastard!” Boss snapped, lunging at the leader with twin daggers spinning.

Everything moved at once. The four ninja standing by sprung to action, pouncing on the shrine like tigers. Griffin clotheslined one mid-flight, throwing him mightily to the ground and then falling after him, his hefty elbow crushing a windpipe. Arpy dove under the shrine’s canopy, trying to evade the storm, but then became inspired. He pawed at the Desert Star’s glass case, striving to open it. After an unsuccessful moment, a knife plunged through the

clay shingles, nearly cutting off his pom-pom. Arpy squealed and stumbled back, hitting the tiles with a winded, “Oaf!”

Luth skipped around Maroon’s flank, trying to stick him with his halberd while Boss charged him head-on. Maroon deftly wove around the jabbing blade while swatting off Boss’s daggers, though he was gradually being pressed towards a wall.

“Lu!” Boss panted between swipes, “The Jewel! Watch it!”

“Right, sir!” Luth heeded him, bouncing away to check the shrine.

“I’d worry more about yourself, traitor,” Maroon sneered, turning his attention full-force to his opponent.

Griffin ripped another lackey off the shrine’s top, grappling his leg and swinging in him broad circles before cracking his skull against one of the shrine’s supports. Luth skidded onto the scene, driving the head of his halberd into the shrine and forcing one of the remaining ninjas to duck outside. Griffin rammed him like a bear, his switchblade sticking under black-clad ribs. Griffin then took the handle

and heaved the ninja wholesale over his shoulder, the blade slicing loose with a spray of gore.

Luth started to maneuver his polearm for another pass into the shrine, where the final lackey had already pierced the glass and plucked free the Desert Star. His long blade rejected Griffin's throwing knife and he jumped out of range before Luth could skewer him. Griffin was like a train, barreling after him, but the ninja had a diversion out of his pocket before he could be touched. The smoke bomb sparked and ignited with an ashen tunnel-blast, stunting Luth and Griffin in their tracks.

Boss savagely pushed forward, fueled by righteous rage. His daggers merely snipped and singed the impossibly stoic Maroon, who would only smile odiously while his garb was slowly ripped to shreds and his ground quickly lost. He handled his scimitar expertly in one hand and a dagger of his own in the other, tucked back defensively.

By the time Maroon's back hit a niche in the wall, he hadn't burned up one bead of sweat, nothing but rain dousing his aplomb. Boss, on the other hand, was puffing and frazzled, an inch away

from giving up his daggers and just scratching and biting like an animal.

Maroon raised his scimitar, almost not trying, and Boss bluntly knocked it away. One dagger closed in on Maroon's jugular and the other poked just beneath the cage of his heart.

"Alright, you bastard," Boss seethed once he held a comfortable checkmate, glaring daggers up at his taller adversary. "*Now* I'm in a position to ask questions."

Maroon stood tactfully still, his breathing calm and even, soaking in the gentle Burmecian rain and the sudden, grizzly quiet that had settled over the bailey. A cruel grin snaked across his lips, exposing a pointed canine.

He asked, smoothly, villainously, "You wouldn't kill your own son, would you, father?"

Boss blanched, instantly, completely numb. He stared dead into Maroon's eyes, a dawning horror melting his composure. "…Alfy?" he whimpered feebly.

Maroon only gloated. "Mercy…"

The dagger he was holding back slid across Boss's middle, opening a bloody gash.

"…Is your weakness."

Luth staggered out of the noxious haze, which thanks to the rain quickly dissipated. He coughed and shuddered, fighting to regain his sense of direction before it was too late.

"Son of a bitch, we lost them," Griffin discerned, clenching that sense of dread in Luth's stomach.

"No…" He shook his head and bounced around the floor, hunting for any vestige of the last ninja or the Desert Star.

Both were gone.

Arpy sat upright with a vulgar sneeze, a fine layer of soot exploding off him. "ASSHOLES!"

Griffin set to task on one of the ninja corpses, disarming and disrobing him. He yanked off the ski mask and snorted with no astonishment at the face that met him.

"A Genome. Of course."

"What? Really??" Luth knelt over another, stripping the body as far as he would dare. He found

a little blonde man, round-faced and feline-tailed, just like the other—and just like the third casualty, as they discovered next.

“No shit! We knew it all along,” Arpy affirmed. He began to pat himself down in search of a lighter. “Goddamn, I need a smoke. This is crazy shit. I almost got whacked.”

“This is terrible…” Luth lamented, and then remembered Boss. He sprinted halfway across the courtyard to find him.

“Sir! Are you all right?”

Boss sluggishly turned toward the hail, meeting Luth with ghostly eyes. Maroon was gone, not even his weapon left behind.

“Sir…” Luth stopped short, hesitating upon sight of the ugly red slice across the Genome’s belly. “Sir?! Are you hurt?”

He looked down at the wound, slowly, slowly, like time was grinding to death, and fingered the bloody, frayed edges of his clothes.

“Damn…” he muttered faintly, “I liked this shirt.” And collapsed.

“Sir!!”

10. The Company Secret

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He woke up to the tidal lull of an oscillating fan and a dainty rapping sound, like creaking plastic. He flexed his hands and feet, which felt sore and supple with disuse, and savored the cool, soft caress of the bed sheets. It would be perfect to just relax and drift back into oblivion, but something pressing about reality-particularly that funny clicking noise-rustled him up.

Boss opened his eyes to an old friend, his bedroom ceiling. None of the lamps were on, but the curtains were slightly parted, letting in a bar of late afternoon gold over the scorch-marks and cracks in the tiles-and even without that, sunlight perforated the red cloth, bathing the room in flesh-warm hues.

He turned his head-his neck creaked, too, disconcertingly like plastic-and glimpsed the alarm clock: 5:33 PM.

He blinked and turned the other way, trying to orient himself-trying to remember *when* and *how* he got home, and why his head felt like a water balloon,

about to pop-when he spotted Luth at the foot of his bed, jamming away on a GamePocket.

It was the quaintest thing he'd ever seen. Luth didn't seem to notice he was being watched, instead staring into the handheld screen and crunching its buttons with utmost focus. Boss rubbed his eyes and cleared his throat, slowly building up the nerve to wreck Luth's high score.

"I thought you didn't play video games."

Luth jumped like a rabbit shot in the rump, dropping his game to the floor-the batteries popped across the room like shrapnel. He gaped at Boss like at the undead, and then illuminated in the next heartbeat, throwing himself around the Genome's shoulders. "Sir!"

"Ack," Boss coughed, startled by the hug.

"Oh sir, you're okay!" Luth held on for a steadfast minute, the tip of his tail twitching gleefully. His whiskers tickled Boss's neck as he mumbled observantly, "…You smell like you need a bath, sir."

"That's great, Lu. Um… you can get offa me now."

“Oh-sorr-um.” Luth carefully pushed himself up and wiped his eyes. They looked red and puffy, and the fur beneath sunken and smeared with brine-it seemed like he hadn’t rightly slept in days. “It’s just, we were so worried.”

Boss shuffled to sit up as well, leaning against a pile of pillows. “We?” he croaked, his throat nauseatingly scratchy.

Luth reconsidered. “I was, at least.”

“What happened? How did I get here?”

His protégé promptly recited, “You collapsed, sir, back in the palace at Burmecia. You took a serious wound. It looked really bad at first, I have to say, sir, but it didn’t turn out so bad in the end. You didn’t even need stitches. We brought you back here as fast as we could-me, Arpy and Griffin, that is. I wanted to take you to a hospital, but I remembered how you felt about doctors, so Arpy called in a private physician. At least, I think he was a legal doctor-he was a little unorthodox-he was a Qu, sir. He bandaged you up and figured out what was wrong very quickly. He said it was chimera venom.”

“Chimera venom?”

“Yes sir, we think it was on the weapon that cut you. It’s a very rare and potent toxin. The doctor said you had a big enough dose to kill ten grown men and you were sick for days sir but I’m really glad you’re alive I was so worried I wished I could’ve done something besides sit here—”

Boss reached out and petted Luth’s wrist, trying to tranquilize his poor partner before he wibbled out of control. “Whoa whoa whoa, calm down, Lu. It’s all right.”

Luth sniffed and bit his lip, easing into a cool shiver. “Sorr-um. How do you feel, sir? Can I get you something to drink or anything? The doctor also said ‘eat many greens,’ by the way.”

“No, it’s okay, I’m…” Boss shook his head slowly, still dazed. “Did you say I was out for days?”

Luth nodded and added in a mewl, “I thought you were a goner, sir.”

“Were you here the whole time?”

Another nod.

Boss smiled with a faint, ashamed twinge. “Aww. You didn’t have to do that, Lu.”

Luth hiccupped, nearly laughing. “I think it’s my job, sir.”

Boss opened his mouth, straining to say something to that, but he lost the heart for it and settled for another tired smile. “So, uh… Griffin and Arpy are here?”

“No, sir, they left a while ago, after they were finished with our prisoner.”

“Prisoner?”

“We caught one of them, the Red Angels, I mean. We were right, sir; they were Genomes. They were hiding their tails. Griffin killed two of them, and one got away, but we got one alive. Griffin and Arpy questioned him when he regained consciousness.”

“Griffin?” Boss tipped a skeptical brow. “*Questioned*?”

“Well,” Luth bluntly admitted, “Arpy questioned while Griffin broke his fingers.”

Boss rolled his eyes. “Oh boy, I bet that went well.”

“He didn’t tell us much, that’s true. All he would say is that their mission is to ‘complete the restoration of Terra.’ It didn’t make a lot of sense.”

Boss’s gaze turned nebulous. “Terra…” he murmured at his hands.

“Yes, sir.”

He blinked, snapping back to reality. “That’s it?”

Luth scratched the side of his nose as he tried to recall. “No. We also learned that Maroon was his father.”

Boss’s countenance sank, distress filling the whites of his eyes. “Oh God. Not… literally, right? I mean, not his *father* father…?” he stressed.

Luth recoiled a notch, baffled by his reaction. “Um, yes, we’re rather certain. What else do you think he could have meant?”

“I dunno, I was hoping maybe he meant like a priest, like ‘Father Blaine,’ or maybe he was adopted or… I dunno. You sure that’s his kid?” he tried again, almost pleading.

“Yes sir, he definitely was, from what he told us.”

“*Was*?” Boss’s voice raised an alarmed octave.

“Ahm, well…” Luth nervously steeped his fingers, their claws chittering against each other. “When we were done, I wanted to turn him over to

the police, but Arpy and Griffin didn't agree with me."

Boss slapped his hands over his face. "Please don't tell me they killed him."

Luth grimaced. "…His body's in the East River, sir."

"Oh, *Christ*," he bemoaned, "I'm going to hell at top-mach. I'm afraid to ask, but what about the Jewel?"

Luth ruefully shook his head. "The Desert Star is gone. The last one got away with it, presumably with Maroon. I'm so sorry, sir. We failed."

Boss wilted into the bedspread. "Is there *any* good news?"

He received a lame shrug. "We're still alive, sir."

That remark festered along the floorboards for a minute before Boss cracked. "…Heh, eheh, hahaha. Oh… so we are. We do have *that*," he slurred, peculiarly sarcastic, and tumbled out of bed with a groan.

Luth caught him halfway to the ground. "Oh, oh oh no, sir, I don't think you should be getting up so soon. You need rest."

“I’m *fine*, Lu,” he growled, pushing off Luth’s barring arm and wobbling to his feet. “And from the sounds of it I’ve rested long enough.”

“Are you sure?” Luth persisted, concern scrawled over his face.

“Yeah, yeah. Ah…” He scratched his head, and then yanked his hand back after encountering a fistful of slimy, unwashed hair. “I could actually go for that drink, now that I think about it. Don’t suppose you have any tonic on you?”

Boss relented under Luth’s priggish glare. “Okay, okay, a soda is fine.” He reeled over his foul temper, a guilty pang forcing out a polite afterthought. “Please?”

Luth sighed some relieved noise and stood. “Of course, sir. I’ll be right back.”

“Thanks,” he responded on his way into the shower. “I’ll be in the office in a little bit.”

It was really a perfunctory setting, the office. Boss more often took to it for the change of scenery than anything else (especially actual business), and

that was exactly what both of them needed after the stressful (for Luth, anyway) marathon of bed-sitting.

Boss, still damp and smelling of strawberry shampoo, was stretched on his back over the sofa, twirling a lock of his own hair like some idle teenager.

Luth languidly paced around the rug, feeling sticky in the same shirt he had worn in the rain nights before. A shower was smelling more like a good idea for himself, too. “What are we going to do now, sir?” he eventually broke the silence.

“I don’t know, I don’t know… It hurts to think.” Boss draped an arm across his eyes, defeated. “Ugh, I feel like ass. I haven’t felt this bad since the turn of the last century.”

“What happened then, sir?”

He replied through a distantly sated grin, “The best New Years party ever.”

Luth plodded through the poor humor, his mind throwing down the brakes a delayed minute later. “…Wait a second, you mean the Millennial?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Luth shook himself awake. “But that was well over thirty years ago. I wasn’t even born yet! There’s no way *you* could have been old enough to have been there, sir,” he pruned, positive he caught his boss in a tall tale.

Rather than shooting off one of his typical, inane quibbles, Boss painstakingly rolled forward, dull fingers digging for purchase in the sofa’s myriad creases and cigarette burns, and leveled a glare at Luth-too cloudy, blindingly deep, incredibly ancient. He then rubbed a broad hand down his face, wiping the specter off, crystal shallows returning.

“Ah, right, well… Lu.” He drew a heavy, foreboding breath. “I think you’re ready for the company secret.”

Luth didn’t know what to think. He followed Boss back to his room. He could have thought, ‘*This is it. This is what I’ve wanted to know since I started here,*’ but he wasn’t sure *what* it was he really wanted to hear-or if, by this point, too far down the road of organized crime, burglary, ninjas and murder, he really wanted to hear it.

“I wanted to tell you, Lu,” Boss started his case, his voice suspiciously frail, stumbling on every little gust of thought. “I wanted to tell you from the start. I… Sometimes I want to scream it, just, in front of everyone, just get it out-but I couldn’t. I can’t. I never know how to say it, and even if I did… It’s not that I never trusted you, Lu. You gotta understand that. It’s just that… I was really waiting and… hoping to see if you were ready to… trust me.”

Hurt disbelief echoed, “I trust you, sir…”

A light hand fell on Luth’s shoulder. “I know. I know you do. I’m really grateful, don’t get me wrong. It’s just, what I’m about to tell you isn’t going to be easy to believe. You’re going to think I’m a lunatic-I mean, if you don’t already. That’s what people say about us Genomes, right? That we all belong in padded rooms? Maybe I do, but what I’m saying here is true. I swear it. I don’t have any proof-I wish I did, but…”

Luth returned the gesture, firmly reassuring, “You’re not crazy, sir. You can tell me. I’ll believe you.”

His earnestness was accepted with a dim smile. “I know, Lu. You’re a good friend. That’s why… You’re going to be the only man alive who knows

about this. Well, you and…" He gulped, as if the words were salt. "Maroon, I guess. But we'll… deal with that in good time."

Boss tossed open the doors to his wardrobe, not even flinching like Luth did at the blazing graffiti across them, and began to dig along the baseboards. "It's painful to think about the past. I try to forget it as much as I can. But I knew from day one-I knew from the moment you told me you had that diary that we'd be having this talk. I just didn't know when, or how…" He sighed a thwarted note. "This would be easier if you had finished reading it."

Luth watched Boss pick through shadows clogged with coats and shoes. "Lady Freya's diary? Why? What's in it?"

"How far did you get, anyway?" Boss warily queried.

"Ah, I'm not sure, sir. It's not easy to tell, I mean, it's not exactly written like that…" he floundered.

"Before or after the Mist War?"

"Oh. After."

Boss wet his lips anxiously. "Did you find out… Did you read about what happened to the-to the

King of Thieves?" He almost choked on the title.

These were the things he was forbidden to speak of-the questions he wasn't allowed to ask. Now Boss was asking for them, and that was how Luth knew he was truly at the bottom of some kind of grave, ineffable *truth*.

"You mean how he died?"

Boss nodded, and then finally procured a fat, leather-dusted book.

Luth knelt for a closer look. "No sir, I don't believe I got that far."

Boss seated himself on the floor and deflated with a stout sigh, collecting himself. "…Okay. Okay. Listen, this probably goes without saying, but what I'm gonna try to show you is between you, me and your great-grandma. You understand?"

"Your secret is mine, sir." '*Please, just be out with it.*'

"Right, right…" he quickly submitted, as if reading Luth's mind. Boss opened the book, revealing an album of photographs. He flipped to the middle and then passed it to Luth's open lap.

“These are all pictures from when the company got started. Go ahead and take a look.”

Luth honed in on the first snapshot, noting the delicately penned date below it: *1886*. In tawny pastels it depicted a small storefront on a crowded, cobbled street-a very old picture, indeed. The old-town style shop was bannered with antique letters, “EXPRESS DELIVERY,” and on the street facing the camera was a boy suavely leaning on a bicycle-a flaxen-mopped boy with a tail. Standing a little off-center in a very stiff, dull pose was a bulky demi-beast (*‘A tapir?’*) in denim suspenders.

Beside it, the next photo: *1902*. A crisper shot and a larger building, one with some trees behind it. The headcount tripled, and the Genome-boy sported a moped now. A paunch little tapir stood next to the bigger version.

1931. A color photo, greyed on the fringes, the same Genome if Luth didn’t know better, lots of trucks and an old minibus-class ship, which the group of twelve was waving towards enthusiastically.

1950. Newer still, lookalike Genome shaking hands with a silver-bearded man in a black suit, on familiar front steps to a familiar, nine-storied edifice,

the familiar skyline behind it trimmed down just a tad.

Luth turned the page.

1943. A lush park, a plume of roses along a white-washed wicker archway, a wide-set man of the cloth, the look-same Genome and a woman in white, two blonde tails twined around each other-a wedding.

1944. A frazzled woman, white again, same again, only in hospital gown this time, a freshly-born child swaddled in her arms.

He backtracked to the previous page, out of intimate territory. “These are interesting photos, sir. Ultima Express is a very old company, isn’t it?”

“Yep. We celebrated our centenary ’bout ten years back. Isn’t there something a little off about those photos, though?” Boss nudged him towards the pictures again.

“Hmm…” Luth tried his best, but came up addled. “I don’t know, sir. I see what looks like the same man in all of them-looks just like you. Your predecessors, right?”

“They do look just like me, don’t they? Same age and everything, huh?”

‘Not a day out of their teens.’ “They certainly do. A funny coincidence, isn’t it, sir?”

“Yeah… funny,” he agreed, his voice solemn as he reached over and flipped back to the lady in white.

“This woman, is that Meridia?” Luth had to guess.

“Yeah…” Boss nodded, fixed trance-like on her portrait across the page. “Beautiful, isn’t she?”

“She is, sir. So that baby is you, right?”

Boss was lost, silent, disquieting.

“…Right?” Luth pressed, louder.

“That’s Althier,” Boss said abruptly, nothing light in his tone. “But I’m not in that shot.”

“What?” Thrown off, Luth glanced from the album, to Boss, and back. “But I thought you told me that was your name. Meridia is your mother, right?”

"…No. No, Lu, I… lied. A bit. That's what I've been trying to say."

Luth met his gaze for a moment-a shady, deep, portentous moment, the point of it all careening towards him like a diving plane. "What exactly *are* you saying, sir?"

Boss was looking at a shoebox in the back of the wardrobe as he said it. "Meridia wasn't my mother. She was my wife. And Althier is… our son."

Luth's mind went utterly blank. "…What? What? No, you… You were married, sir?"

"Twice, actually."

"Wait, that's… not *possible*," his logic flew into gear. "This picture's dated 1944, and it's 1992 now, and, for you to be the father here you'd have to be…" His ears tilted, making him look dizzy with math. "Fifty… sixty years old, *at least*. There's no way."

"Keep going," he said flatly.

"What?" Keep going *where*? Farther? *Older*? "Wait, that's… no, sir. That's not funny."

"I know."

“How old, sir…?” Luth asked timorously, about to die where he sat, crushed under the suspense of the impossible.

“Ahm…” Boss wiggled in place and leaned against the closet door, appearing somehow *shy* as he tried to brush it all off with casual uncertainty. “Two-hundred and eight, this year. Give or take a… year or two. I never knew my birthday, exactly.”

“…*That’s not funny*, sir,” Luth reiterated.

“I know.”

“Dear gods…” The photo album slipped to the floor, out of Luth’s capacity to notice or care. “This is crazy.”

“I know.”

A spark of outrage flared to the surface. “How do you expect me-what exactly are you trying to get me to believe, sir? What are you taking me for?” Luth challenged him, daring him to concoct another innocent lie or affable ruse.

“Look at those photos again, Lu,” Boss insisted, staring him down and meeting the bluff. “Am I lying?”

Luth nearly didn’t-nearly afraid, but he picked the book up and checked a final time. He was afraid he was going to see what Boss wanted him to see. He was afraid he would see…

Old photos, new photos. Same childlike, easygoing grin. Same spindly tail. Same bleached streaks in his hair.

“…If you’re not Althier,” Luth gravely wondered, “Then who are you?”

“You’re smart, Lu. You can do math. Why would your great-great-great grandmother know about what I’m trying to tell you? Why would it be in *her* diary?”

It was Lady Freya, venerated late Dragon Knight, highest in fame, one of the saviors of the world-it was *her* epiphany, through him. There were no more lies.

He was looking at a kid. He was looking at an old man.

“…*Oh my God*.”

“Where?” Boss quipped, ruining it.

“No,” he snapped back, to the present, to madness. “I mean-you!”

He forced a chuckle. “Flattering guess, but I’m not.”

“No! I mean…” *It wasn’t funny.* “Oh my holy dragon gods… *You’re the King of Thieves*.”

“Oh, no,” Boss groaned, thumping his head against the cedar door. “Don’t start talking like that.”

“You are!” It wasn’t funny. It made terrible sense. He was afraid he was going to *believe it*. ‘You were there two hundred years ago! You fought in the Mist War! You knew my great-great-great-grandmother.’ The implications hit him like cold water, his features dissolving in awe as the air leaked out of his chest. “That means… your real name is—”

“No!” Like a mousetrap, Boss clamped his muzzle shut with one tense hand, something feral and piercing in his usually open visage. Luth held still, his heart bottled up in his throat, thoroughly cowed.

Boss eased off, hesitantly apologetic, but then followed through his sentiment with a calmer, “No. You cannot ever, ever, *ever* call me that. Never. Never ever. Just, please.”

Once freed, Luth clicked his jaw back into place and stammered softly, “I’m… I’m s… yes, sir, but…

why?”

Boss wagged his head at the floor like an overburdened mule. “Because, because… God, Lu, do you have any idea how long it’s been since anyone’s called me that? I don’t think I could stand to hear it again. Too many… too many memories.”

“Oh. I see. I’m sor… my condolences, sir. But, this is… this is incredible! I mean, it’s no joke, right, sir? Please don’t be kidding-I’d have to kill you, no offense, sir,” Luth entreated, desperate to believe against all his good sense.

“I’d wish you luck with that, Lu, but it’s no joke. I swear it.”

Luth rocked in place, at once giddy, astounded and disturbed. “Oh, my gods, oh, my gods… How? How did you do it?”

Boss was completely removed from his partner’s excitement. “Do what, exactly?”

“Do-do everything! This company, all the press, all the-the names, the Mist War, your son—”

Boss quirked an eyebrow. “You don’t need me to tell you about the birds and the bees, Lu.”

“No, sir!” He threw down his fists in a tantrum. ‘I’m trying to be serious. You have to tell me everything, right now.’ He then leaned close and reverently whispered, as if the gods should not overhear, “*How have you lived this long*?”

Boss moved off, slinked into a chair and switched on a lamp, preempting the fading daylight. “Relax, Lu. I’ll tell you everything. It’s just going to take a while. One thing at a time, alright?”

Luth nodded eagerly and crowded Boss’s feet like a child around a campfire. Boss swallowed a mean laugh and gave his best shot at being “serious.” “Where should I begin…?”

Luth led him to the first hurdle. “How could you have run this company by yourself for a hundred years without anyone realizing you’re the same man?”

“Well, *there*.” He flashed a coy grin, relishing the dramatic suspense. “You really want to know?”

“I think it’s a little late to ask me that, sir,” Luth said testily.

“Haha, I suppose you’re right.…I guess it all started way after I’d put everything behind me.”

He closed his eyes, gathered his thoughts and then grimaced, simple reminiscence already souring his mood. It took an aching minute before he sobered enough to resume, “After my first wife died, I made myself pretty scarce. I went to the old Black Mage Village and stayed with some of my own kind for a while, just trying to blend in and forget everything. I couldn’t really sit in one place for long, though. Couldn’t do that hermit shit, either.” He inflated with mock airs, performing as if from a play, “I am a social creature, after all, my dear Maurice.”

At Luth’s bemused reaction, he dropped the act with a shrug. “…Uh. So I eventually went back to Lindblum, where I grew up, and got a little delivery business going. It was just something to keep me busy. I had a dinky little bicycle and everything, just like you saw in that photo, there. By that time, everyone assumed I was dead and forgot about me, so it was easy to get a fresh start. I learned pretty quick that being a Genome in this part of the world isn’t a cool thing, though. If I wanted to get around the bad rap, I needed a little street cred. So I started telling people I was the bastard grandson of the King of Thieves.”

Luth blinked, piecing together the alibi. “You… impersonated your own non-existent illegitimate grandson.”

Boss folded his arms behind his head and beamed with perverse pride. “Hehehehehehehe.”

“How did you possibly expect that to work?” Luth criticized.

“Heh, I didn’t, really. Nobody could prove shit either way, and all Genomes look alike, right? The Royals in Alexandria were pissed to all hell-wanted to shut me up so bad.”

“Wait, so, your wife-I mean, your first wife, she was Queen Garnet, yes?”

Boss nodded.

“So, her son…?”

“Adopted,” he cut to the quick, callous enough to shock Luth again. Everything about the conversation was too surreal to perch upon and pick apart, though, so Luth had to run with it.

“Really?…*Oh*. I didn’t know that. Why didn’t you and Queen Garnet have children? Er, if you don’t mind my asking, sir.”

Boss shrugged, hardly bruised. “It was a technical thing, I guess. Hell knows we tried. Just doesn’t work between Genomes and humans, apparently-just like between Burmecians and humans, right?”

“Ah. And the crown prince was supposed to be legitimate. Now I see why Alexandrian royalty wanted to keep you quiet so badly.”

“Exactly. But you know what, rookie? You can hide people-you can even hide facts, but you can’t stop gossip. I don’t see what their big deal was, anyway; it was my good name on the chopping block, not theirs. So, thanks to the gossip I stirred up, my new business got a lot of press. Suddenly it was really taking off. In a few years I had an office, my own staff, our first airship and everything. After a while, I realized that I couldn’t keep it up forever, because…” He rolled his wrist, a heady silence filling the blank. “You know. So I disappeared again.”

“Disappeared?”

“I left my assistant in charge of the company and ‘retired’ to another Genome colony. I can’t even remember which one. I stayed there long enough for everyone to forget me, dead and gone. I tell ya, Lu,

those colonies are great for getting away from it all. Nobody wants to look for you there. Anyway, after a long time down the road, I returned to Lindblum and took the company back. Guess who I said I was?"

"The son of the founder…" Luth was catching on.

"Bingo. And you know what? People bought it, just because the alternative was believing that I was the old man himself, and I looked *way* too young to be him, right? A long time ago I figured out that it is just as easy to manipulate skeptical people as it is gullible people. I got to use the fact that Genomes are the biggest pariahs since the Black Mages to my advantage."

"Dear gods…"

"You see where this is going. Rinse and repeat, and that is how I have become the great-great-grandson of the King of Thieves," he concluded jauntily.

"That's incredible. You know, what I heard is that your father died in an air crash."

"Yeah…" Boss flippantly dismissed the rumor, "Those are easy to fake. Well, if you're rich and have an airboat to spare."

“But there’s something I don’t understand: Why hide your name? If you wanted to perpetuate the myth that you’re an heir to the King of Thieves, wouldn’t you want to hold on to the name?”

“Oh. Well…” He shrugged shiftily. ‘All that business wasn’t intentional. Not at first, anyway. Actually, the mob had more of a hand in it than I did. I think a lot of that prejudice against Genomes helped, too. Let’s just say, Lu,’ he explained in sage hindsight, “That if you’re someone as powerful as me, and you want to forget something, the whole world will forget with you.”

Luth considered that for a pensive stretch. *The power to make people forget…*

Boss briskly clapped. “Any questions, my ever-curious rookie?”

“Is that what you hired me for, sir?”

Taken off guard, Boss yelped something unintelligible, probably in the vein of, “What?”

“To keep your identify a secret?” Luth pursued, increasingly indignant. “If I’m working for you, I won’t leak it, right? That’s all I’m worth to you, isn’t it?”

Boss was floored. “Lu, I…!”

“You don’t have to say it, sir,” the Burmecian moodily interjected. “I understand.”

“No, no.” Boss refused to let Luth understand it like *that*. “Look, I’ll admit it. That’s one of the things I had in mind when I hired you.”

Luth’s scowl fell on a dust bunny near the bedpost. “I see.”

Boss slid out of his chair and crawled around Luth, carefully peering up into his partner’s disdain. “…Are you mad?”

Luth didn’t budge. “I feel a little betrayed, sir. *Again*.”

“Heh,” Boss could only snort, his trademark light humor betraying him. “That’s it? You don’t feel like yelling or hitting me?”

“Do you want me to lash out at you?” Luth retorted, striving to sound bitter despite Boss’s pacifying gestures.

“If it’ll help.”

“…What was the other reason you hired me?”

“Huh?”

“You said that was one of the things. What are the others?”

“Well…” Boss flopped onto his back, like a submissive puppy. “To be honest, you remind me a bit of… her.”

This at last won eye contact: a small sideways glance. “Lady Freya…?”

“Yeah. I mean, not… that much, but.” His tail batted the air and his fingers laced in the springs beneath the bed, as if all his parts could never pay attention at once. “You have some things in common. And you don’t have to believe this, but I really do trust you, Lu. I could see what kind of person you were from the moment you set foot in my office. You’re headstrong, polite, dedicated, a little naive, but really… honest. I love how honest you always are. You don’t have a lot of passion, though. I was hoping, maybe once you got comfortable around here… and, uh, around me, I’d get to see some fire out of you.”

Luth clenched his fists and eyes, fighting himself. *’It’s not that easy to…’*

“You know,” Boss continued, gently sincere, “You don’t have to stay. I never expected you to, especially now that I’ve dragged you into all this trouble. You can still get out. You’re always free to quit.”

Luth couldn’t stand it. *‘He always makes it sound so simple. It can’t be this easy to let it all slide. It’s just like when he told me about him and the mob, and Julia. And I just keep taking it. Am I that simple, or is it him? Why must he be so, so…?’*

“Oh, sir…” His hands trembled, and his eyes opened to misty slits. “Why are you always so difficult?”

Boss shot him a lopsided grin, the one that made everything look plain and silly despite… *everything*. “I try.”

Impossible. Luth broke down, coiling into a tight ball, laughing and sobbing in funny little fits. Totally disarmed, Boss could have laughed until he cried. “And who thinks *I’m* crazy? Look at you!” He gingerly patted Luth’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I was trying to be mad at you,” Luth sulked at the floor.

“I know,” Boss chuckled. “You were pretty convincing!”

Luth eventually managed to peel himself off the ground, his snout burning and damp from all the ridiculous sniveling. “…I won’t leave you, sir. I swear I won’t.”

“Aw, Lu…” Boss pulled him into another hug, embracing ridiculous. “I don’t deserve you.”

“No more secrets, right, sir?”

“No more.”

“Good. Now tell me about Meridia and Althier.”

“…Sheesh.” He clicked his tongue and let Luth up. “You never pull your punches, do you?”

Luth reoriented himself and tossed back a sappy smile. “Never, sir.”

“Fire away, then.”

“How did you two meet?”

“Ouch.” Boss climbed onto the bed and nested on a pillow. “It’s been… fifty years now, I guess. I’d just come out of a rough spot, probably drinking too

much, trying to make myself retarded. See, a good friend of mine had died—”

Luth claimed a pillow for himself, getting comfortable for story time. “Who?”

“Scrabber, Arron. Helped me a lot with the company, way back when. Really cool guy. You don’t know him.”

“Oh.”

“But anyway, I’d got out of the funeral-I hate funerals, you have no idea-and started thinking about ol’ Scrabber, and the more I thought about him, the more I thought about other people I used to know who’re dead now, and it just snowballed. I got depressed to all hell, real fast. You ever see those stories on TV about guys who try to off themselves, but then for whatever reason don’t go through with it, or they screw it up, and suddenly they’re all better and love their live? That’s such a load of crap. I always felt worse.”

“Uh…?” Luth drawled warily between the lines.

“But anyway, I was just flirting around some club, trying to pick up a cheap date. I figured maybe getting back into some of my old tricks would perk me up. Heh, it’s just funny, how you never get what

you expect. Just when you say, ‘That’s it. I’m done. Never again,’ someone like her… Someone just… amazes you. She was a real free spirit. Kind, strong, funny… no one could tame her. I’d never met anyone like her, especially not another Genome. I mean, you know how… eh, whatever.

“Point is, she was… We were doing good. I didn’t think I could love anyone like my first wife again, but she changed everything. It was good until… well. Reality caught up with us. Our son was growing up and she was getting older and I, y’know, wasn’t. It was the same bullshit all over again. I had to leave, before things got too complicated.”

“Was it hard to leave behind your wife and only son?”

“It was the hardest thing I’d ever done-or pretty close, but those are older stories. It feels like a whole ’nother life, way back when.”

“The Mist War?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his nose diffidently. “But, back to Mery. She wanted to go with me, to hell with the company and everything-and God, Lu, I would’ve taken her, but Althier… We wanted what was best for him. We thought Lindblum was going

to be the best place for him to grow up, and then when he was ready, the company would be waiting for him. We wanted him to have every opportunity in the world.

“So she stayed in Lindblum with our son, and I stayed out of sight. I mean, we still saw each other every now and then-wrote letters, birthday cards, the works. Heck, when Alfy got breaks from school, he’d spend some of them with me. Mery would say he’s gone to see his ‘Uncle Z,’ heh. Those were great times-well, as good as they were gonna… Well. I don’t know what happened. As Althier got older, I saw less and less of him. Eventually he quit writing me back. He was always really… bitter, about me. I don’t think he ever understood why I left him and his mother. I can’t really blame him, there.”

“Didn’t you ever tell him? About your real name?”

“No. His mother could have, but I don’t know. I know I should’ve, but… damn, Lu. How do you talk to your kid about that?”

Luth didn’t know, so he didn’t say.

“So, he kept getting more and more rebellious as he grew up-cut class, stirred shit up with Mery, fell

in once or twice with the cops-until one day he just disappeared.…He hated me."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true, sir."

"Oh no," Boss said with bright certainty, "He said so. It was the last thing he said to me. He hated me and my company and didn't want anything to do with me, so he was leaving. It was on a note on the refrigerator, in big red marker. We never saw him again. Poor Mery, she was crushed. She wasn't the same after that. After a while, she quit speaking to me, too. I think she blamed me for what happened to Althier."

Boss drifted off, a boggy film crossing his eyes. "I wasn't even there when she died. I didn't know… Heh." He rubbed his nose again, masking a sniffle. "I didn't think it would hurt as much the second time. She was always good at proving me wrong."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to open a wound."

He didn't even correct his apology. "It's okay. I'll be okay. I'll always be okay. It's my curse."

'But that's so sad, sir.' He couldn't even say it. It would have sounded cheap, and what *could* he say, really, to someone who had lost two lovers to the ages?

“Well.” Boss straightened, back to business. ‘I didn’t have a lot of time to feel sorry. I had to come back and reclaim the company, playing the part of my own son.’ He glanced to the photo album left on the floor and shrank with a depreciating shrug. “This company, you know, it’s not really much, but… it’s something that won’t die on me unless I let it, y’know?”

“Sir…” Luth offered plaintively.

Boss shook off the pity, struggling to keep mellow. “I never quit wondering what happened to him, though. I didn’t know if he was okay, or alive or what.…Until the other day.”

“What do you mean? What happened the other day?”

“He was right there, Lu. I didn’t even recognize him. He’d changed his name to Maroon and everything.”

Luth’s eyes bulged with alarm. “Maroon? Oh *gods*. What? No. Maroon is…? Oh no, sir. Oh, oh no. This is terrible.”

“I know.”

“Oh no no no, this is really terrible! If Althier is your son, and he’s Maroon, and that man we caught was Maroon’s son, then we-ohmygodI’m so sorry, sir. I’m sorry, I’m sorry—” Luth was pitched into rambling shock.

“Lu, Lu, please.” Boss grabbed him, holding him still. “It’s okay, you didn’t know.”

Luth’s hyperventilating simmered down to whimpers. “I told them not to kill him…”

“I know, Lu. It’s not your fault. It’s just really, really, *really* bad luck-and Griffin being a dick.”

Luth bit his lip. “You’re taking this rather well, sir.”

Boss returned a jaded eyeroll. “I would, wouldn’t I? I think I’m pretty desensitized to people dyin’ on me.”

“At least now you know what became of Althier, sir,” Luth figured, digging for needless consolation.

“Yeah. It’s been thirty years… He’ll be forty-eight next month.” He fidgeted with the tag behind his shirt collar and remarked, seemingly to himself, “I can’t keep this up much longer, either.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

Boss looked away, evasively pensive. "… Nothing, never mind."

Apprehension clenched Luth's nerves, jumping him to conclusions. "You can't leave again, sir. What's going to happen to the company? And to you? And to me?"

Boss treated his fretting with a glum smile, one hand ruffling Luth's dirt-brown hair. "Don't worry about that just yet."

Luth hummed, hardly satisfied, but ready to move on. "You know, sir, you never did answer my first question."

The Genome playfully scoffed, "What, the first *million* of them?"

"The '*how have you survived this long*' one," Luth urged. His complaint feeling incomplete, he then amended, "…Sir."

Boss shrugged haplessly. "I can't age. I wish I had an explanation, but I don't. I've run into a lot of crazy shit, especially during the Mist War, you know, and there's no telling what all of that did to me-or, hell, why it didn't affect any of my friends the same way. Believe me, it still freaks me plenty the hell out, sometimes."

“You just stopped aging? When did you realize this?”

“I dunno, hard to say. It wasn’t just one day, *bam*, ‘Holy shit, why am I still here?’ The whole thing kinda crept up on me.” He scratched his head with an introspective frown. “I think it was pretty damn obvious once I was getting hit on by my best friends’ *grandkids*, though, geez.”

“Hehe, *really*?” Luth caught his lip in a pinch. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t mean to laugh. I’m sure it wasn’t funny at the time.”

“I guess it’s funny *now*,” he permitted. “You just have no idea. It wasn’t only the age thing. I never get sick-I mean, the real ‘cough-cough’ kind. Not one cold, sore throat or pesky STD, ever. Heh, I practically have to poison myself for a buzz. You remember that night you came in here and talked to me, I guess a month back? I’d taken *six* phendaquil,” he bragged.

“Six?” Luth waded through ignorance. “That doesn’t sound like too terribly much.”

“Phendaquil is a tranquilizer for *chocobos*,” Boss enlightened him.

"…Oh." Luth would be impressed, if he weren't appalled. "That is too terribly much, then."

"It doesn't seem to matter what I do. I can't even go hungry. I tried starving myself once, just to see how long I would last."

"How long did you?" Luth pried, morbidly curious at this point.

Boss crossed his arms and huffed at himself. "Tch. It was disgusting. I had to give up after six months! I felt like shit and looked like a damn dusterhead. Still didn't go hungry."

"Six *months*?" Luth boggled at his committed recklessness. "Without food?"

"I wouldn't recommend it."

Luth was torn between meaning to say, '*You shouldn't do that; it's unhealthy,'* and '*You shouldn't BE ABLE to do that.'* All that came out was, "That's insane, sir."

"I know," he couldn't deny. "It feels crazy. It's like I'm invincible. I can feel pain, but…" He thoughtfully scratched the bandage under his shirt, though the fresh cut didn't even itch. "Everything heals so fast."

“You’re immortal…?”

A measure of dread in Luth’s tone made Boss reconsider. “I don’t… I’m not sure. I don’t *really* think I’m invincible. I’m pretty sure it’s possible to kill me, just…” He plucked away the old cotton wraps on his wrists and exhibited each. “…Not easily.”

Luth strangled an outburst, merely gawking at the railroads of marred flesh along the Genome’s arms and palms. “I’m surprised I still have these scars,” Boss remarked over them, almost wistfully.

He then took the thought to the next level, taking off his shirt and showing the spread-winged bird of prey in pallid red ink on his back. “See this tattoo I got? It fades out completely in *two years*, I’m serious. I have to see four different guys all across Gaia to keep it touched up without people getting suspicious, and even then, Marla at the *Crystal Artz* shop still gives me funny looks. Been keeping it going almost twenty years now, though. I’m kinda proud of it.”

“That’s crazy, sir-I mean, the situation, not you, sir-I mean—” Luth bit down on his knuckle, muddled. “I should quit talking now.”

“Hahaha.” Boss wiggled back into his shirt. “It’s okay, rookie. I told you to relax.”

“But, um, those scars…?”

“What? They’re just scars. I don’t know why they always stick when I can’t keep a damn tattoo, but whatever. I got some from the war, some from stupid stuff-accidents, whatever. You try living two hundred years and not picking up a few scrapes!”

“Fair enough, sir. Is that why you really wear those bandages all the time? Are you ashamed to show them?”

“…Oh, oh!” He belatedly caught Luth’s meaning, and started to restlessly stroke his wrists. “*These* scars. Um… yeah. These don’t look good, do they? Like I’ve been cutting myself, like one of those manic-depressive freaks, huh? Nah, it’s not like that. Not exactly. Those guys are just trying to get attention, y’know? I knew what I was doing. Or I thought I did.”

“…*What*?” Luth suddenly didn’t want to hear that right.

“Well, I don’t want to make this sound morbid, but I guess there’s no avoiding it. There’s been lots of times where I… Haha, well.” He snickered

bashfully and scratched the back of his neck. “If practice really made perfect, I’d be the best suicide artist in the world by now, hahaha.”

Luth’s throat felt stuffy and dry. “You’re scaring me, sir…”

“*You’re* scared? Try to imagine what I’ve gone through. I’ve hit a lot of points in my life-a *lot*-where I didn’t know what to do with myself anymore. No kids, no family, no prospects-everyone and everything I’d grown up with died and moved on without me. It feels like a curse, sometimes. Most people are afraid of dying. I’m afraid of going on.”

“So what do you do?”

“What haven’t I done?” He leaned back and waved significantly at his surroundings, and all the things beyond them: shipyards, warehouses, offices, an economical empire. ‘I’m one of the richest men on Gaia. Isn’t it funny? All those crazy theories about who I am and what the company is, and it’s really all just one guy, pissing his life away. I kept waiting for one of those tabloid nut-jobs to call me out on it, but it never happened. Nobody ever guessed.’ He stared gloomily at the wreckage of skin around his hands. “So, I tried a few times to put an end to it all. Razors, noose, the conventional stuff.”

“I think I’m going to be sick, sir…”

Boss thumbed towards a bin in the corner. “Trash can’s over there if you’re gonna blow.”

Luth smoothed back his ears and gulped down the creeping *grey* sensation. “Erm, that’s okay, sir, just… You haven’t *really* tried to kill yourself, have you?”

“Oh yeah, several times. Best time was when I jumped out that window across the hall, in my office. You know that one next to the sofa? Actually, I wasn’t trying to kill myself that time. I was trying to prove myself to Meridia.”

Luth shook his head, a discomfited furrow to his brow. “Why? How?”

A defensive shrug. “I was trying to tell her the truth, and she didn’t believe me! Of course, I don’t blame her, but I had to prove it *somehow*. It was a pretty bad idea, in retrospect. Broke a lot of bones. Really bloody painful. I was lucky it was dead o’clock at night and only the drunks and bums saw me go splat. Lots of blood.” He flexed one shoulder with an uncomfortable grunt. “Man, hurts just thinkin’ about it.”

Luth covered his ears. “I don’t think I want to hear any more, sir…”

“Hey, you asked! It sure worked, though. Meridia flipped a lid-said if I ever tried a stupid, crazy stunt like that again, she’d finish me off for sure.” He grinned nostalgically. “God, I loved that woman.”

Luth watched his good spirit waver again. Boss sighed and rubbed a phantom ache in his chest. His malaise didn’t last long enough for Luth to devise some comfort, though, and in the next instant the Genome somersaulted out of bed.

“Man! That’s enough depressing stuff. One thing I’ve learned is that moping over the past is no good way to spend an eternity, Lu.” He turned towards the door and swept a hand over his shoulder, beckoning, “Com’on, let’s go to the basement. I’ve got something really cool to show ya.”

“There really is a secret basement here?”

They took the stairs, for a change. They were supposed to be a fire escape, so Luth never dealt with them before. If he had, he might have discovered the utility sub-floor on his own.

Boss led him around whirring compressors, dripping valves and hissing pipes, each step deeper into stingy green and orange shadows. There was no one else in sight, not even a pest.

“Please, Lu. I am insulted. How could I be an eccentric gillionaire and *not* have a super-cool underground vault? Honestly.” He bumped into a wall at the end of the narrowing corridor. “Ach. I keep forgetting that’s there.” Boss fumbled around the inky corners of bricks, their only light about fifteen paces around the last corner.

Luth heard the tiniest scrape of metal over concrete as Boss scooped up a key. “Hah! There it is.” The Burmecian patiently stood back while Boss tinkered behind the breaker boxes, cracking an obscured lock.

“Oh, and don’t worry,” he assured on the side, “There’s no missiles or giant robots. Just my collection.”

“Collection?”

“It’s a hobby.” Something snapped with a muffled, mechanical ding. “Hey, push hard on that door to your right for me.”

Luth obeyed, surprised by the way the heavy steel slab groaned ajar, like pushing a car. Boss stepped around him and down into the void that appeared, muttering, “I always forget to bring a light. Watch your step down here, Lu.”

There were more stairs. Luth very carefully progressed to the bottom, Boss’s unconcerned voice and a handrail guiding him through the pitch black.

“You might call me a treasure hunter. It used to be a real lucrative trade, back when I was your age. My old boss and his gang, Tantalus, hunted for treasure all the time. Then cities got bigger and the world got smaller and… well. There’s really not much left to the business. It’s kinda a shame.”

Once on solid ground again, Boss cursed and stumbled until he hit a switch, throwing on the lights. A sparse row of incandescent factory lamps split the room in two.

Luth drew a long, shallow, awestruck breath. “Oh… wow.”

It was a single hall, concrete and austere, nothing grand in itself, but along each wall were cases of glass, oak and brick, each sheltering a unique treasure. Luth glided from one niche to the next,

admiring the artifacts in turn: cracked, rune-carved blocks; a cursed mirror; a collection of multicolored, palm-sized, radiant stones; a chimera armlet; an ivory hand bell…

The more Luth looked, the more he saw stranger, esoteric things: a chest full of sundry keys, a Griffin's heart, a rat tail, an antique map of the world, a *Namingway* card, six "Master Hunter" medals of assorted years, and a framed ticket to an old play, dated 1800: *'I Want to be Your… Crow?'*

"These are my precious little canaries," Boss sang, his arms stretched out with a flourish as he swaggered down the aisle. "I hunt them, and catch them, and lock them away in pretty little cages in the dark-and when I am done with them I set them free, for me to hunt all over again…"

"That's madness," Luth shot him down, at a loss for any kinder way to describe it.

Boss rather took it like a compliment, only grinning wider. "You might say the same about all hobbies. You see, what I do is give all this stuff away before I, ah, *take my leave*-y'know, donate to museums, art collectors, auction houses, stuff like that. Then later, when I reclaim the company, I go around and take it all back. It's like a game."

“How very… sporting,” Luth ambiguously commented. His gaze lingered on a bobo totem as he surmised, “You don’t exactly ‘reclaim’ all this legally, do you, sir?”

“Well, Lu,” he quipped, swaying towards the far wall, “They don’t call me the King of Thieves for nothing.”

Luth followed him to the end of the walk, where he beheld a showcase loftier than the others. Standing behind the glass in plain, unassisted glory was an obscene array of old-fashioned weapons: great swords, staves, rods, daggers, clawed gloves, and even a giant, gilded fork. Luth could just make out the inscription on the sword directly in front of him: *Excalipoor*.

Boss picked open the door to the case and rifled through the armory with meticulous grace, eventually pulling out a polearm of fair length and elaborate make. “It’s called the Dragon’s Hair. Your… ahm…” He paused to calculate. “Great-great-grandmother gave it to me. Adele.”

“Lady Freya’s daughter?”

Boss nodded as he passed the weapon to Luth. The Burmecian turned it over thrice, admiring the

relic. The spiral shaft was dusted with gold, and a steeple of three swooping blades crowned the head, each glossed with iridescent violet and fire-orange.

“It’s beautiful…”

Boss bowed into his line of sight, grinning cheekily. “You like it? It’s yours.”

“What? Oh, I couldn’t!” It was the *Dragon’s Hair*. Of course Luth had heard of it. Its edges were the very ones driven into the head of the Great Necromancer, the one none but Lady Freya and her band of intrepid rogues had met and lived to write about. Of course Luth knew, because he read it and believed, and Boss… *Boss was there*.

Luth had barely given it back when Boss’s hands steeled against his, stopping him. “No,” he insisted, his tone oddly reverent. “It belongs to a Crescent.”

He smiled, and Luth didn’t question any more. He understood.

They headed back to the ninth floor-thankfully via the elevators-in contemplative silence. It was almost a momentous occasion, right there: Boss running out of things to say. Luth didn’t dare spoil it,

the Dragon's Hair cradled in his hands saying enough.

There was the inevitably awkward moment outside their rooms, when Luth had to ask, '*What now?*' Before he could say a thing, though, Boss took care of that problem by sagging against the wall with a small, pained moan. "Agh…"

"You okay, sir?"

He sank to the floor like a clumsy sloth, clutching the wall for support. "…Uh… dizzy."

"Sir?" Luth knelt over him, studying his suddenly pale face. "Are you okay? I think you need to lie down some more, sir," he prudently suggested, and helped Boss stand.

"That's not a-huuurck!" Boss doubled over, retching into his fist until a formidable phlegmy mess coated his fingers. He and Luth simultaneously recoiled from the sight of blood and shared a second of horrified shock.

"S-sir…"

Boss just frowned. "…Ugh. That's new. Did you say chimera venom? Because, *damn*." He wiped the ugly humors off on his shirt. "Yeah, I'm definitely

going to lie down," he weakly announced. "I'll see you later, Lu."

Luth impotently watched his boss retreat behind his door. "…Take care, sir. Please call if you need anything."

The door grunted, and then was quiet. Luth went back to his room with the Dragon's Hair in tow, many weighty worries on his mind.

A/N: So ends part 2 (of 3.) I hope that answers everyone's questions (for now). I know it wasn't a big surprise for many, but please don't spoil in the review box.
I have to thank everyone for sticking with the fic so far! Your feedback is always encouraging. More thanks to The RPGenius (aka Arpy) for all the input (and allowing me to freely butcher his good name). A special little thanks this chapter to CuteLucca, for educating me about tattoos.

Next time: the pros and cons of immortality. Boss pays Pevy a visit. Hard.

11. Going to Town

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Luth dozed away the next day; he apparently needed the rest more than he thought. When he finally woke up, at the crack of some noon or another, he first wondered what happened to his GamePocket. It was that trifle that finally broke him out of his drowsing and got him moving. He took a rejuvenating shower and meandered around the vacant office until restiveness drove him onward.

He checked the downstairs lobby next; he didn't want to intrude on Boss's space any more than he already had. Sheryl had some stern scolding and a stack of files for him, and Luth had some tactful explaining to do. Sheryl wasn't convinced that Boss was honestly ill rather than "sick of partying," but Luth figured he got off light, considering.

Luth took his paperwork to the café to mull over through lunch. He sorted through bagels, official documents and what little he knew how to handle, making his best effort not to think about the truth and everything in the past few days that had led to it.

He wasn’t sure what to think about it, anyway. The whole “King of Thieves” gimmick was uncomfortably easy to believe, and Luth didn’t want to be gullible, but… why would Boss lie about something like that? Luth really wanted to have faith, but his father’s words on Genomes never eluded him: *‘They’re sharp little monkeys, but beguiling and delusional—completely out of touch with reality. If you ever meet one, never take what he says at face value.’*

He had nearly finished sorting the past week’s outbound ticket stubs when a bulky, fuzzy frame filled the seat across him. “Hey hey, it’s Lu, right?”

“Oh!” Luth squeaked at someone who recognized him, looking up at a familiar badger. His coveralls and face were scrubbed clean for a change, and Luth could actually distinguish white bands of fur across his cheeks. “Hi there, Mister Gribbo.”

“Hell, pup, just call me Gribbo, already,” he insisted, his voice gravelly like a coal miner’s. “Figured Boss woulda worked that ‘mister’ stuff outta you by now.”

“Old habits, I suppose.”

“Speakin’ o’ that lug, where’s he abouts?”

“Sick in bed, last I saw. I’m afraid he was—” Luth pawed his nose diffidently, minding his words. “Um, I mean, he caught the flu or something, I’m sure.”

“Aw, no shit. Tell ‘im he needs to get his sorry tail better in time for the festival. Me and the fellas got tickets to the boardwalk. Gonna be a great view. No bleedin’ our noses out in th’ towers like last time.”

“Festival?”

“Yeah, din’ja know the Festival o’ the Hunt’s comin’ up this Friday?”

Luth wished it was a more timely festival. His first year away from home, this would also be his first chance to participate, but he really couldn’t afford to go because, well… “It slipped by me, really.”

“Heh, too bad. A dragon slayin’ fella like yerself would stand a fair chance! Boss sez y’can whack a mean monster.” A bear-sized mitt toyed with one of Luth’s yellow envelopes. “So what’re ye up to? Looks like a heap o’ fun.”

Luth frowned at the stack of files. “Some paperwork, yes. Nothing much.”

Gribbo snatched one of Luth's bagels and swiveled in his seat to watch the hanging television across the café. Luth pleasantly ignored him and resumed his business, until the badger remarked weightily, "Ain't that some shit—nickin' all those crown jewels."

"What?" Luth followed Gribbo's crumb-dusted finger to the news blurb on screen: *JEWELS STILL MISSING, AUTHORITIES IN PURSUIT OF "RED ANGELS."*

Gribbo leaned over the counter to gravely remark, "Y'know, people say when you git 'em all in one place, y'can summon eidolons." He tossed his head back with a high snort. "Wouldn't that be a regular calamity? Just like the ol' war."

Boss's portent echoed in Luth's head. *'Letting all the Jewels fall into the hands of some crazy murderers? It'll be the Mist War all over again, is what.'*

"Eidolons…" he murmured at a cargo routing form.

Gribbo's muzzle puckered with a dismissive sniff. "Aye, prob'ly more crap 'n anything, 's what I say. Those suckers have been extinct for almost two

hundred years, am I right? Nuthin' even those Red Devil nutjobs can do about it." He finished his pilfered snack and rose, smacking his lips. "Ya ever been to Chubby's, on 11th Street? Got some great zaghnol wings. Me'n some of the fellas hang out there on Wednesdays. You should stop by on yer own sometime, play some cards with us. You'll have a blast, pup."

Gribbo gave Luth a hearty clap on the back and plodded off, leaving the Burmecian to cough up his own bagel.

It was late afternoon by the time Luth had sorted out all the tickets. The only thing left was to check on Boss, which he'd been rallying the nerve to do all day. He opted not to go in unarmed, a small saucer with some muffins balanced in the offhand as he rapped on the Genome's door.

"Sir?"

Only a whispering fan responded. Luth tested the handle, found it unlocked, and pressed inside.

"Sir? Hello? It's me, sir," he announced the obvious. Once his eyes adjusted to the curtain-muted

daylight, Luth realized he was talking to an empty bedroom. The covers were unkempt, the wardrobe was left open, the ashtray on the nightstand was running over and several empty bottles littered the foot of the bed. The only other sign of life was the stark shaft of light from the adjacent room.

Luth wasn't sure he wanted to go farther, but he was already invading, so he might as well. He set the saucer of muffins in an open chair and tread cautiously into the bathroom.

"Sir? Are you there?" Another disarray greeted him: a toothbrush wilting out of its holder, a dislodged hand towel, an ajar toilet seat, a veneer of lime around the sink's dry edges, a crooked shower curtain, a bathtub filled with silent water… There was neither sight nor scent of anyone through the dank air.

Why was he sniffing around someone else's water closet? *'I'm being ridiculous. Nobody's home. I just wonder where he ran off to, especially without Miss Sheryl noticing.'*

…And why was the bathtub filled with water? He'd only glanced into that corner before, but a second look registered something *else* there, behind

the curtain, peacefully submerged in the peach porcelain.

Without a second to reconsider, Luth shucked the curtain flush to the wall, squinted bemusedly into the tub, and then had a small stroke.

“Oh my God!”

Luth dove in and frantically splashed around a stoic body, which he clumsily propped up and over the rim of the tub. He fussed over Boss’s soaked, clammy, prone form, questing for a pulse and drumming on his back to spur some breathing. The Genome absorbed the treatment with a sponge’s grace, his complexion grey and slimy like a mollusk. His only stirring was the water steadily dripping off his hair and clothes and feeding the puddle on the white tiled floor.

As Boss’s condition gradually dawned on Luth, he started to lose his own breath, gulping desperately like a fish. *’Oh gods oh gods oh sacred dragons he’s drowned he’s dea—’*

A soggy tail lashed the still water, and then Boss’s whole being rippled with a gross spasm. He jolted awake, gagging and heaving onto the floor. Luth leapt in recoil, accidentally bunted his head

against the towel rack and sank back to the ground, his world spinning.

It took a full minute for Boss to spill his lungs enough to speak, and he wasted his first breath on a bubbly belch. “Ugh.” Bleary, bloodshot eyes swam around the room before landing on the Burmecian. “…Lu?”

Luth nodded lamely at the reanimated corpse, flabbergasted.

“Did you pull me out?” Boss asked hazily.

“…Yes?”

Too spent from his revival to even lift his arms, he just glowered sidelong at Luth, absurdly annoyed. “Wha’d you do that for?”

Luth blinked hard and sputtered, his wits boiling to the surface, “What am I—what were *you* doing?!”

“Trying something new,” Boss croaked as he watched tiny rivulets race down the creases between floor tiles. Luth clambered up, shaking and damp, the bath seeping between his toes. “You—it’s—you could have drowned!”

“That was the idea.”

“You’re impossible, sir!” The back of his mind tugged against his shrieking voice, bidding him to stay calm. Luth wasn’t listening well. “How long did you plan on staying in there??”

“Until it worked. Why, how long have I been under?”

“I don’t know, sir, I just came in and found you!”

“What time is it?”

Luth stopped and actually thought about it. “It’s a little after five.”

Boss rubbed his eyes and blinked, groggy and nonplussed. “…AM or PM?”

“Oh for Reis’s sake, get out of there, please.” Having heard enough, Luth took him by the arms, scooped him out of the tub and propped him on his feet. The Genome staggered listlessly, his buttoned white shirt and oversized jeans steeped in bathwater and phlegm.

Luth scoured the cupboards for something useful while Boss clutched the towel rack and shivered. “…’m cold,” he observed dimly, staring at the backs of his hands. “…and pruny.”

“I would think so, sir,” Luth cut him down, terribly exasperated with the situation.

He fumbled with his belt, pulling his sagging pants more snugly over his hips. “…got crazy wood,” his drunken murmurs continued.

“Didn’t need to know that, sir.” Luth passed a towel into Boss’s sluggish arms. “Here, dry off, and I’ll get you something to wear.”

Boss didn’t say any more while he changed clothes (Luth uncovered some cotton threads at the bottom of a drawer that *smelled* clean enough.) He moved like a sloth as Luth led him back to his bed, where he buried himself face-first in a pillow.

Luth didn’t know what to do about his torpid companion until he spotted the saucer of goodies left in the chair. He fetched them and stood over the bed, appealing, “Perk up, sir. Look, I brought you a muffin. Well, two—I didn’t know if you liked strawberry or blueberry.”

“Mn,” the pillow moaned, “No thanks, Lu. I lost my appetite, and I don’t think I’ll be seeing it ever again.”

“Oh, sir,” Luth gently prodded, “It’s been several days. You need to eat.”

“Or what? I’ll starve?” Boss flopped onto his back and huffed at the ceiling. “God, if only.”

“Sir…” Luth sat on the edge of the bed and frowned at his pasty-looking charge. “You’ll never get better at this rate.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, Lu, I’m not trying to *get better*,” Boss mordantly spat.

Luth shrank an inch, cradling his shunned muffins. His innocent reaction vexed Boss’s temper, and the Genome turned away with a guilty shrug. “…Sorry. You didn’t deserve that.”

“I’m just trying to help, sir.”

“Want to help? You can wake me when the world ends.”

Luth shook his head. “Oh, sir. What’s the matter? Still feel ill? Is it the chimera venom?”

“I feel like a walrus carcass. I think that’s the longest I’ve ever been… y’know.”

“Yes, about that,” Luth’s censuring tone followed that imagery, “Why on earth did you do that, sir?”

After a moody silence, Boss muttered, “…My son hates me.”

“Oh.” That thought hadn’t occurred to Luth before. He’d been trying so hard to move past all the bad tidings of late that he hadn’t considered Boss’s reaction to the same. “No he doesn’t, sir. Nobody truly hates his parents.”

“He tried to kill me.”

Luth bit his lip. “Okay, maybe he does a bit.”

“Did you see him back there?” His words were like ripples, small and wobbly as they leaked out of his knotted chest. ‘He wanted to kill me. He was trying—he was—he wanted me dead, Lu. Even if I didn’t bleed dry, he wanted me to die from that poison—a nice, slow, painful death. Did you see his face? It had so much… hate. I’d never seen so much pure hate.’ He swallowed a sob. “That’s my son. My son murders people. What have I done…?”

“Sir…” Luth was hardly qualified to console a heartbroken father, but he tried a reasonable tack. “You can’t blame yourself. He ran away, you couldn’t know—”

“No, *I* ran away,” he wailed. “I abandoned him. If I had stayed…”

“You couldn’t,” Luth insisted. “And you didn’t abandon him; you left him with his mother. You did

what you thought was best for him. It was *his* choice to run away and take this path, and his choice alone. You can't be at fault for that."

"Hrmn," Boss grumbled as he rolled under the bedcovers, "Thanks Lu, but I don't think I'm in the right mood to listen to reason today. I think I'm just going to keep wallowing like the big idiot I am."

Luth fretfully knitted his brow. "I wish you wouldn't talk like that, sir. It's unbecoming of you."

"Oh really? Unbecoming? Hah!" he laughed one harsh, histrionic note. "Give me a reason to care. My wives are dead. My past is buried. My only son hates me to death. I killed my grandson! There's nothing left for me. Give me one good reason I should stick around this cold, cruel world another minute."

"Well, I…" Luth trailed off, overwhelmed by the task. The next moment was filled with nothing but the buzzing of the fan.

"Don't hurt yourself here, Lu."

"I… might have a few answers," Luth gingerly conceded, "But I don't think you'd appreciate them, sir."

“Oh, perfect. That’s it.” Boss sat up and casually demanded, ‘Where’s a gun?’ He reached under a pillow and, to Luth’s horror and amazement, procured one: a little black revolver, which he aimed between his eyes. “Awesome. I’m outta here.”

Luth slapped Boss’s wrist like a frenzied old hen, and the firearm was dropped. “No, sir, stop that! There’ll be no suicides while I’m here.”

“Spoil’sport,” Boss pouted.

“It’s not funny, sir!” Luth scolded as he took the revolver out of reach. “Why do you keep one of these under your pillow?? And I thought you couldn’t kill yourself, anyway.”

“I just haven’t been trying hard enough.”

“I *really* wish you wouldn’t talk like that, sir.”

Boss collapsed into the blankets with a long, sodden breath, and resumed brooding at the wall. “I wish you wouldn’t care so much, Lu. Makes it harder on me.”

Luth pinched the bridge of his nose, stymied. He was never going to understand, much less know what to say, and he was only grateful that he had enough judgment to stop arguing before he got a

headache. He was just going to sit there until Boss sorted things out for himself. He could afford to wait—he had nothing better to do, actually—and Boss didn't have the nerve (or strength) to kick him out, Luth knew.

His patience had nibbled away half of the blueberry muffin when he overheard a dusty, resigned sigh. "I just wonder sometimes: which *god* did I piss off to deserve this?"

"Apparently the god of death, sir," Luth blurted.

Boss hitched onto his elbows and narrowed an alarmed look at Luth. "What did you just say?"

Thinking he gravely misspoke, Luth retracted, "I only meant the Great Necromancer, the one you beat—no disrespect, sir."

Boss's glare fell out of focus, and he started cackling at nothing. "…Huh. Heh. Heheh. Hahaha. Ha!"

"What's funny, sir?" Luth asked, vaguely disconcerted.

The Genome slithered up to Luth and squeezed his shoulders in a simple hug. "Ah, Lu. You're a genius."

Luth blinked. “I am?”

“Of course. What would I do without you?”

Luth was too relieved at his boss’s change of heart to question it. “Your own laundry.”

“Hahah, geez. When did you become such a smartass?”

“Must be all the good influences I’ve been hanging around lately.”

“I’m so proud.…Ayup.” He lethargically tumbled out of bed, hitting the ground with a wooden thud. “Let’s get rolling.”

“Huh?”

“If you’re not going to let me have any fun,” he decided as he rooted along the floor for what Luth could only guess, “I might as well take care of some business.”

“That’s encouraging to hear, sir.” Luth glimpsed the neglected food and strictly ordered, “Eat your muffin, first.”

“Did you know that after three days without eating, you stop feeling hungry? Scientific *fact*.”

“That’s no excuse, sir.”

Boss stiffly rose and took a muffin with a miffed grunt. “Fine, mother.”

Luth nodded primly while Boss rummaged on his hands and knees around the skirt of the bed, the half-chewed muffin held in the coils of his tail. “That’s a good Sir. So, where are we going?”

“Mph, ‘we’ aren’t going anywhere,” Boss stressed around a full mouth. “You’re staying here. I’m going to—is this strawberry?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s delicious. Anyway, I’m going to hunt down Althier. Where did you put that gun?”

Luth flinched at the notion. “Sir, I don’t think that’s wise, especially in your condition,” he advised, ignoring the gun request.

“Fuck my condition.…Hmm,” he paused to admire that quip. “I should use that line at the club sometime.”

“Really, sir,” Luth admonished, “You don’t even know where to look!”

“No, but I know who to ask.” He stumbled, fell onto his shoulder and broke into profane verse, ‘Fucking undead son of a god, *my fucking knee*, what the fuck, who the fuck— “He plucked the obstruction off the floor and examined it.” What the fuck is a *battery* doing down here?’ Sitting up, he finally spied the handgun Luth had relocated to the nightstand. “Oh hey, there it is.” He tossed aside the battery and traded it for the revolver.

“I thought those were illegal to carry in public,” Luth carried on the lecture, as futile as he was realizing it was. “Actually, I think they’re illegal to carry at all, unless you’re police or military.”

Boss shuffled over to the wardrobe and into some jeans and a light denim jacket. “Geez Lu, you act like it’s the only illegal thing I own. Besides, there aren’t gonna be any cops where we’re going.” He hesitated, to reinforce his own wording. “…I’m. Where *I’m* going. *You’re* holding down the fort.”

“Sir, I have to object.”

“I know.”

“Where exactly are you going? And who could possibly know where—oh!” Luth’s ears pricked

intuitively. “Althier’s been working for Boss Pevy, hasn’t he?”

He stuffed the gun into his pants and fastened a dagger to his belt. “I like the way you think, Lu. Always on top of things.”

“So Pevy’s the one behind all this—the Red Angels, I mean?”

“No, Althier is the one behind the Red Angels and Pevy is a big goddamn retard. But he might know where Althier is now, so I’m heading down there to find out.”

“‘Down there’? I hope you don’t mean Gatortown.”

“Two in a row, Lu.”

“Um, aren’t you wanted for Don’s murder there? Don’t they have ‘hit men’ after you?”

“So?”

“Doesn’t this strike you as a little suicidal?”

“I should only be so lucky,” he murmured into the back of the closet.

“What??” Luth all but yelped, not even wanting to hear that right.

“That’s why I’m going alone, Lu,” he clarified.

The Burmecian sprang to attention. “No, sir. I’m going with you.”

Boss leaned out the cedar doors to shoot him a stern look. “I appreciate your balls, rookie, but this is serious business: guns, violence, guns, death, *guns*, ect cetera. I don’t need you gettin’ fragged over my lousy tail.”

“This won’t be any different from Burmecia Palace, and I helped you there!”

Boss stamped a foot, rattling the floor. “This *will* be different! Did I mention the guns?”

“You know what I mean, sir.”

“No, I don’t think you get it—”

Luth stamped back, likewise adamant, “Like hell, sir! I’m a Dragon Knight.”

Boss held his breath, struck by that assertion. He looked Luth over, saw the grim dedication in his stance, and dispelled all his hot words with a sigh. “…And you are. But when I saw you jump off that

balcony the other night, I about shit my pants. I thought you were gonna get stuck up like a pin cushion. If something happened to you because of me, I don't think I'd ever forgive myself. I can't risk it."

Luth nodded anyway, his mind set. "I can handle it, sir. I don't want you to go through this alone. I'm your partner, aren't I?"

Boss wavered, passed one more appraising look over him, and finally relented. "Get a weapon, and stay *sharp*, okay?"

"Absolutely, sir." Luth started for his room, not waiting on a second thou—

"On second thought…" Boss caught him at the door and handed him the revolver. "Hang on to that. No offense, but you'll need it more than I will. You know how to use it, right?"

"I…" Dragon Knights were a special branch of Burmecia's military, more ceremonial than effective; though the old combat arts were their specialty. Some were trained in firearms, but they weren't standard issue. Luth preferred polearms, of course. "I can handle it, sir," he fibbed, and scurried out to gather his things.

Luth breezed through his room, picking up the essentials: beaten leather bracers, nylon footpads, a faded blue tunic, a canvas travel bag and his dragon halberd—all he had on first setting foot in Lindblum, and as far as he was concerned, all he ever needed. He stowed the gun in his pack with no intentions to use it.

He skipped back into the hall, nearly slamming into Boss in his anxious haste. “Slow down, tiger,” Boss drawled as he locked his door behind him—something he never used to do, but it was sadly understandable nowadays. “We ready to go?”

He caught Luth’s nod, donned a pair of black sunglasses and strode purposefully towards the elevators. Luth was going to dispute the choice of eyewear when he noticed something more significant.

“Uh, sir? Shoes?”

“Missing?” Boss returned, not losing one barefooted step.

“Yes.”

He didn’t even turn around. “Perfect. Let’s beat feet.”

Boss’s hair wasn’t even dry by the time they reached the sewer crawl, and he tore blindly through the dingy, dark maintenance grid as if it were his own back yard. Luth could barely keep up.

He had a serious look about him that Luth hadn’t seen before, and it was just a little frightening. A stable personality wasn’t one of Boss’s choice qualities, so there was no telling what he would do in this state. That was largely why Luth insisted on accompanying him.

The other reason was a small, itching one, and Luth had been looking all day for the best opportunity to scratch it. He finally took a shot while navigating the pitch, gurgling conduit that led up to Gatortown’s threshold.

“I’ve been thinking a lot, sir, about everything you told me the other day.”

Luth could practically see the black shadow ahead of him roll his eyes. “This sounds like trouble.”

“I was only going to ask: what should I call you from now on?”

“Wha’d’you mean? I dunno, Lu. Same thing you’ve been calling me.”

“Sir?”

“What?”

“No, I mean that’s what I’ve been calling you.”

“Oh. Well, whatever works.”

He heard a splash as Boss hopped an invisible sinkhole, which Luth accounted for in his next few paces. “I’m sure, sir, but, it’s just—this puts everything I know about you in a whole new light.”

“Why?” He sounded more exasperated than intrigued.

“Why? I mean, you—” Luth couldn’t get over Boss’s apathy. “You’re the King of Thieves! You fought in the Mist War!”

Another soft splash, and Boss stopped. “Look, I’m still the same guy!”

“But you’re a hero!”

“Nooo,” he groaned, and there was a clap like a hand to his face. “Don’t even start that. I’m *not*.”

“Sir! Don’t you see what this means? You’re exactly what I’ve been looking for.”

Luth couldn’t see how Boss expressed his, “…,” but he imagined a raised eyebrow.

“I mean, not like that, but I mean—” Luth nearly slipped on something meaty and slick that grazed his feet, and he choked back a yelp.

“Your ancestor.”

“Yes, Freya Crescent, sir. You knew her personally! You fought together, and saved the world!”

“It’s not… I didn’t…” All Luth could make out was flustered panting.

“Didn’t you, sir?” It felt like the day they first met—Luth standing in his office, pleading for his own validation. He had wanted so badly to become a *real* Crescent, not just in name, but in spirit and motive as well.

…Did that matter now? Now that the diary was lost, his Pilgrimage was abandoned and they were standing in the middle of a sewer, about to challenge a slumlord? Have his motives changed? Has *he*

changed? “Can’t you tell me anything about her? Anything at all?”

Boss sighed, defeated. “Ask me about this tonight, okay?”

Maybe not—not really. Luth smiled, with or without him. “Promise, sir?”

“Promise. Now let’s keep moving. We’ve got a date with Pevy, and I want to make this as quick and painful as possible.”

Luth sneezed at the deluge of smog and neon light that hit him at the end of the tunnel. He wiped his eyes and tailed Boss through Gatortown’s plaza, trying to ignore the gawking they received from passers-by. A sour old man sitting on a crate with a beer in one hand and a shotgun across his lap spat in their direction.

“We’re attracting a bit of attention, sir,” he eventually had to comment.

“They’re probably surprised I’m showing my face down here. Hey, is that Arpy?”

He pointed into an archway along the outer wall, and there the moogle was, conferring with the type of woman Luth would not have been surprised to see

around Boss's room any given night. She was wearing two spangled bandanas, a wildcat tattoo and little else. Arpy hid his pom-pom under a pink, zebra-striped derby hat.

The moogle appeared very commanding for someone the woman had to bend down to look in the eye. "If you see Conner, you tell 'im if he fucks or fucks with any of my hos again, he's going to have to answer to me! Now mush, bitch!" he barked as he jumped up and smacked her on the ass, spurring her away with a dainty yelp and the loud clacking of stiletto heels on cobblestones.

Boss approached him with a jovial grin. "Hard on work, I see."

Arpy squeaked like a dog toy as his rump hit the pavement. "Fuck me black and shit me blue; you're alive!"

"Surprise."

He regained his composure with a flurry of curses. "What in the super white-water blue-balled fuck are you doing here?! You're not crazy; you're the single dumbest motherfucker I ever seen. You're so dumb you go to school with fish and eat sticks.

And to think I just finished telling all my dawgs that you got shanked. Kupo.”

Boss stuck his hands in his pockets and smirked down at the moogle. “Wha’d you do that for? No faith in me at all, I see.”

“For your own damn protection, you stupid duster! And now you’ve waltzed right up in this joint and ruined your image.”

“I wasn’t aware I had a ‘dead’ image, but I am touched, really.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Boss scooped him into a bear hug and twirled him around. “Awwww, Arpy likes me! He doooeeees.”

“I said cram it up your ass, you fucking jungle fruit!” the moogle grouched as he squirmed free. He reclaimed his hat and smoothed the ruff of fur on his chest. “You know, if not for that thing in Burmecia and the fact that you’re one of my biggest patrons, I wouldn’t be talkin’ to your shit-flinging dumb chimp ass.”

“Chimps don’t have tails,” Boss caviled.

“Shut your fuck up, smartass.” He then aimed a tiny, pointed digit at Boss’s nose. “Hey hey, I had Lucy crawlin’ up my tailpipe about you. Said you pulled some kinky shit on her. You know I don’t ‘preciate any roughin’ my hos.”

Boss shrugged defensively. “What? Com’on, I don’t play like that. Who’s Lucy? She that real young one?”

“Damn straight. She’s my newest—totally twenty, by the way,” he assured his questionably legal audience.

“Psh, she’s just new. She’ll get used to it.”

Arpy dragged Luth into their circle. “You hearin’ this? Your boss is a freakin’ deviant. The Regs keep a list of guys like him—like Teddy Gambask, fuckin’ kiddie porn freak.”

Boss rolled his eyes and pirouetted on tar-smeared toes, disregarding him. “I’m not hearing anything!” Luth exclaimed as he applied appalled hands to ears and turned away.

Arpy tugged on Boss’s pant leg to draw him close and rasped confidentially, “Seriously, what the hell’re you doin’ here?”

“I’m here to see Pevy. You know if he’s around?”

“Pevy?!” the moogle’s small voice cracked. “You must have acorns for balls, ‘cause you’re nuts if you’re thinkin’ of goin’ after him here.”

“You let me worry about that. Where is he?”

“You didn’t happen to forget that Pevy’s area of expertise is *guns*, right? There is a *strong chance* that he has many of them. And bullets! You can’t forget the mutherfuckin’ bullets, with which he will proceed to cap your ass.”

Boss impatiently waved him down. “Look, I’m very aware, okay? Are you going to tell me if he’s down here or not?”

“Yeah, he’s in his corner, but you’ll never get within pissin’ range of ’im. His door thugs are gonna look at you once and shoot you. And then they’re gonna drag you inside and shoot you again. And then Pevy’s bitch is gonna shoot you. And then his dog. And *then*, Pevy himself is gonna step outta his office, kick you in the balls and shoot you in the head. You’re gonna be one pepperoni pizza special motherfucker.”

Boss swiped the moogle’s hat and batted his pom-pom on his way off. “Thanks, Arpy. Keep it

real.”

Arpy bounced in place like a hot potato, his inept wings buzzing in distress. “Were you listening to me, you crazy fuck? You can’t go that way!”

Boss heedlessly marched on, weaving through happy hour traffic at a pickpocket’s pace. Not forgetting his locale, Luth protectively clutched his pack as he skipped to catch up. Two blocks, the caved-in corner of “Kino’s Bar” and a fenced-off water main later, they stopped across a brick-strewn, noisome gully from a steel door and its pair of bouncers.

Luth studied the strange rifles strapped across the shoulders of the guards and the intent expression on Boss’s face before enquiring, “You don’t think you’re impervious to bullets, do you, sir?”

“Now would be a good time to find out, wouldn’t it?” Boss chirped, brazenly optimistic.

“No, sir! Honestly.”

Boss rubbed his nose. “Nah, I guess we’ll play it safe.” He winced in afterthought. “Well, as safe as this is gonna get.”

“So Pevy’s behind that door? You don’t have a plan for getting past those guys, do you, sir?”

“Not a one.”

“This is the most reckless, thoughtless thing you’ve ever done,” Luth declared.

“Phbt, nah. You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Luth sighed, scratched his ear and mused, “Well, at least there’s only four. We’re not too badly outnumbered, I suppose.”

“Four?” Boss cocked a perplexed look towards the two guards. “Where do you see the other two?”

“I was counting their guns.”

Boss harrumphed and folded his arms. “Bah. Guns. Why’s everybody so scared of a bunch of noisy little sticks?”

“Everybody isn’t *immortal*, sir, and I’m not wholly convinced you are, either. Really, we need a plan.”

“All right, all right.” Boss sat cross-limbed on the ground, taking a turn at thoughtfulness. It didn’t suit him—just *sitting still* didn’t suit him, but thankfully within seconds he was up again. “Okay, we’re ready.

You let me worry about the guns, Lu. Just stay behind until I get through the door, keep cover, and try to keep up."

"This sounds like a horrible plan," Luth was frank.

"Horrible *like a fox*," he remarked guilefully, slid off the bank of the sewage canal and bounded to the other side like a… well, monkey. Luth stood back and watched as he sauntered up to the bouncers and brightly announced, "Good evening, gentlemen. I see you have a pretty rusty door, there. Those hinges are about to fall apart. But you're in luck! I happen to be a door-to-door salesman. Of doors."

Luth's jaw dropped. The guards, a short, dorky young chap with glasses and a tall, bald, sharp-shouldered man who shared Boss's proclivity to wear shades indoors, exchanged bored looks.

There was no way they were going to buy tha—

"The boss said that if we see you, we're to shoot you on sight," the bigger grunt reported with an uncompromising scowl.

"Oh, did he?" Boss set his hands on his hips and cheekily riposted, "That's such a coincidence. I told my righty the exact same thing about him."

No questions asked, the rifles rolled into ready hands and leveled at Boss's chest. The Genome recoiled a step and threw up open arms. "Whoa. Hey, let's take it easy. You don't want to shoot me."

"What makes you think that?" the smaller one retorted, his peregrine, callous voice making him sound more threatening than he looked.

"If you were really gonna shoot me, you'd have done it already."

Not the types for slick reasoning, both guards grabbed Boss by the arms, slammed him face-first into the wall and stuck the barrels of their guns to his head. "You raise a very good point," came the sinister reply of the smaller guard.

Luth's nerves were as taut as a bowstring. He was ready to spring over there and bludgeon those goons any second, armed or not, but the thinnest thread of trust in Boss's scheme bound his feet. Boss chuckled through a bloody nose, flushed and babbling like a drunkard, "Ahaha, wow, can't put anything past you guys. You're professionals."

The guards held their steely positions. "What do you want?" the short one was direct.

Boss squirmed against the bricks and swallowed a cough. “Ah, the crux of the matter. What *do* I want? Hey, here’s a thought. How’s about you wrap me up and take me to see Pevy? I know orders are orders, but hell, I bet I’d make a much more tasty prisoner than a corpse. Besides, the dead can’t talk, and he might want to hear what I have to say. It’s important information—you know, serious business.”

“Somehow I doubt it,” the short guard cut him down, but the tall one rode over him. “What kind of information?”

Boss curbed a grin. “Well, I can’t just out and tell you, now can I? It wouldn’t feel right to confess under pressure like this.”

“Confess what?” Now the small one’s interest was piqued.

“I told you, I can’t say, but if you bring me to Pevy you can find out. Hell, you’d be doing him more of a favor than me. I’m a dead man either way, right?” With a challenging leer, he added, “Unless you don’t think you can handle me alive…”

The guards conversed in hesitant glances until one nod led to another. The big guy reached for the

doorknob and gruffly instructed the other, “Search ’im, Drew.”

Boss quietly withstood Drew’s rough hands as they stripped away two daggers and a switchblade Luth hadn’t even noticed before. His only complaint was a low gasp, almost like a growl, “Ah… ah! Watch the tail, buddy.”

“Shut up,” Drew snapped, and once satisfied with his looting he took Boss by the wrists and shoved him through the door.

They slipped out of Luth’s sight, and then he heard, in succession: a heavy metal clang, the screeching of heels, a clipped, “What the—” and a thundercrack. Luth jumped off the mark, flew to the unguarded door and threw it open to behold Boss standing over the still bodies of the two guards, one of their rifles held at a clumsy angle in his hand.

“What the…” Luth echoed Drew’s last words.

Boss flashed a smug grin and gestured over Luth’s shoulder. “Shut that door and stay behind me.”

Luth did as he was told while Boss reclaimed his blades. Luth stole a second look at the wasted guards; the larger had buckled knees, a knot on the

back of his head and a brutal gash over the left eye, and the smaller… Luth grimaced. From where the bullet took him, he wouldn't need his glasses anymore, to say the least. It was hard to tell if they were still alive, but at least they were out of the way.

"What the hell was that??" ricocheted down the corridor. Boss hissed, "Shit, we gotta move."

It was a long, narrow passage, grimy red bricks on each side and dangling lamps spotting the rough-swept cement floor every ten feet. Luth saw two more men skidding around the corner when Boss raised the rifle and shot out the light bulbs. Each fizzled out in a row of dainty explosions, carving a swath of darkness down the hall.

Luth could have asked why Boss didn't just shoot the men instead of leaving them blind with broken glass everywhere, but then he was running and Luth was following and the men were cursing and confused and there was gunfire like lightning, pinging off the walls and pipes in the ceiling. In a cracking silhouette he saw Boss falling on one of them like a mantis, daggers bared like pincers. The other man spun his gun and Luth felt a hot flash graze his leg, but he didn't stop until their collision threw him into the back wall and the gun out of

reach. The Burmecian danced to keep his balance, skipped off his left foot, planted his right in the grunt's gut and then brought up his left to kick him in the face, knocking him flat out.

Luth stood back and tried to get his bearings in the dim light at the crook of the passage, where another array of lamps revealed two plain doors. Out of the sudden quiet Boss wiped his bloody nose and snickered. "Heh, that was fun. You okay?"

Luth nodded uncertainly. His heart was still racing down the hall and there was a searing tingle near his ankle, but he felt like he was in one piece. "Where is Pevy?" he asked, hoping he wasn't standing on him—everything was shadows and crazy.

Boss shrugged past him and stopped at the first door. "In here, I hope. This is his office." He held his chin and stared through the wall at a lost memory, before whirling to Luth and asking, "Man, you know that movie—ah, shit, what was it called? It had Berry Strife and Jacob Steploth."

"*Time Trigger*?" Luth stabbed at it.

Boss snapped his fingers. "No, no, the one where Berry knocks down Don Cornhole's door and

shouts, ‘Where’s my money, bitch?’ and he don’t know so Berry knocks his kneecaps out with a crowbar?”

Luth brightened with recognition. “Oh! *Dirty Gil*.”

“Yeah yeah, that’s it.” Boss’s excited mien then dropped into utter deadpan. ‘This is going to be like that.’ He wrapped his hand around the door handle, and then paused. “Stay outside.”

“But sir,” Luth offered a whiff of protest.

Boss’s tone was dead firm. “Do it, Lu. That’s an order.”

Luth bit his tongue and held back. He would admit he didn’t want to be the first one through that door, but he still wanted to help… Boss rarely made his job easy.

He all but kicked the door apart, making a dramatic ruckus. Luth peered tentatively around the doorframe and saw Pevy seated at a comfortable wooden desk in his drab, austere office, on the phone and seemingly oblivious. He looked just as Luth remembered from the party—heavy-set and glowing with wispy, fire-orange hair and ruddy anger.

“You’re late,” he rebuked the intruder with plain annoyance, his face buried in letters. “You’re still late. You owed me six yesterdays ago. Why have I not had you shot yet?” he nonchalantly posed.

“That’s a good question,” Boss responded on cue, and at the unexpected voice Pevy dropped the phone’s receiver and stared at the Genome in baleful shock. ‘You!!’ he croaked. “You’re dead.”

Boss patted his heart and feigned enlightenment. “Really? So that’s what’s wrong with me. And I thought it was just indigestion.”

When the Genome boldly encroached on his desk, Pevy bolted out of his seat, a gilded pistol appearing in his hand. Boss froze for a considerate moment, nothing but morbid curiosity in his bearing —silently asking, *“Are you gonna use that or what?”*

Just as silently—just as lethally, Pevy answered. He mashed his jaw square with gruesome conviction and pulled the trigger. The air shuddered like a bursting drum and Boss crumpled to the floor.

“Sir!!” Luth barged in despite orders, and his fur prickled at the sight of his mentor in a slain heap at his feet, one conspicuous hole blown through his

middle and out his back. He was almost too stunned to notice Pevy's gun turn to him next.

"And you! You should have stayed ho—"

The Genome rolled over, groaned and painstakingly crawled to his feet, rendering the room dumbfounded. "Owww…" Boss complained mildly as he rubbed his pierced chest.

Pevy's bug-eyed aim bounced from Luth, to Boss, to the blossoming red wound in Boss's shirt, and then he shot him again. Luth and Boss jolted in unison, and the latter took a longer second to recompose himself. He drew a shaky breath, stood up straight and passed a thumb's-up back to Luth. "Yep, impervious."

"What in God's hell!?" Pevy exclaimed while punching another bullet into Boss, who staggered and writhed in high dudgeon.

"Owwww! Son of a fucking *bitch*! Would you *stop that already*? That hurts!" He drew his blood-mottled clothes into his fists and glared daggers at Pevy. "*God damn it*, I liked this shirt, too."

Boss lurched forward and smacked the gun out of Pevy's shocked hand, just as it fired another round over his shoulder and into the wall. Luth cringed to

avoid the wayward bullet as well as the spattered blood down the floor, up the wall and across the ceiling, like sprinkles on a grizzly cake. The Genome charged on, rammed Pevy into the corner and forced a dagger against his lumpy throat.

“I don’t like guns,” he hissed in Pevy’s face. “They’re kinda impersonal, y’know? If I’m gonna kill a man, I want to feel him die on the end of my blade.”

The larger man trembled, his countenance turbid with flashes of fear and outrage. “How did—w-what are you?!”

Boss snorted. “Heh! ‘What.’ That’s a great question. But from now on I’m going to be the one asking the questions. Lu! Get over here.”

“Y-Yes, sir?” Luth was shaking, too, but he obediently stepped forth.

Boss pushed Pevy deeper into the corner and then slid around his desk, rifling through the drawers. “If he moves, split him like a log.”

Luth’s halberd didn’t falter, gladly taking the dagger’s place. “Of course, sir.”

While Pevy stewed in furor, the fine edge of a dragon's steel wing about to slice out his voice box, Boss scrounged up a roll of tape. "Wow, duct tape. You keep making this easy for me." He handed it to Luth and indicated the chair with very clear instructions. Boss then picked the golden gun off the floor, squatted on top of the desk and surveyed the situation with an insidious smile.

"Woo, that's tight stuff, Lu," he commented on Luth's knack for bondage. The reel of tape was almost completely spent strapping Pevy to the seat. "Have you done this before? Looks like Pevy has—he's just that type. That's what Arpy tells me, anyway."

Pevy wiggled haplessly in his cocoon and spit at Boss, "What the fuck do you—mplhphlmm!" Luth wrapped a flourish of tape over his mouth, muffling him.

Boss paid him no mind, interested instead in the box of cigars on the desktop. He sampled one, lit it with a silver lighter (cleverly shaped like a gun) found nearby and took an experimental puff. He then rejected the cigar with a sour frown, turning it over in his hand. "Ugh. Look at this thing. This is just too much. It's obscene. Who wants to be seen

with a big smokin' dong hangin' outta their mouth? Just looks like you're compensatin' for something." He propped the cigar in the corner of his mouth and turned to Luth. 'What do you think, Lu? Do I look more manly?' He snuffed it out on the clean veneer of the desk without waiting for a response—fair enough, since Luth wouldn't know where to begin. "Eh, I'm not feelin' it."

Boss finally pocketed his sunglasses and fixed a dark-rimmed glower on his captive. "Listen Pevy, this is how we're going to do this. I'm going to talk a whole bunch, and then when I get to a *question* I'm going to stop, and then you're going to answer it, and then you're going to stop, and then we're going to repeat this whole wonderful exercise until I'm happy. And hell, if you make me happy enough, I might let you live. You like living, don't you, Pevy?"

The tape was helpfully sheared off his face, taking a few hairs with it. Pevy choked on a cry, stared six degrees of hate at Boss and said nothing.

The Genome steepled his fingers and lectured, "Now, this is *your* turn. You're supposed to talk now. But I'll give you this one, 'cause I'm such a nice guy. See, it seems to me these days that people

don’t enjoy their life as much as they’re afraid of death. Are you going to cooperate with me because you want to live, or because you’re afraid to die?”

“You’re insane!” Pevy belted out, and Boss retorted with a bullet in the man’s calf. “Yep.”

Pevy’s nostrils flared as he watched his own blood stain his left sock. “Grraaah! My leg, you—fu—*what the fuck*?!”

The Genome’s demeanor turned grave. “You fucked with my company. You fucked with my family. You fucked with my *people*. Now you’re gonna fuck with me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking abou—”

“You helped them frame me for Don’s murder, you son of a bitch!”

“What?? I was never the one who said you did it!”

“No, you only hired Griffin to finish me off, right? Don’t bullshit me anymore, you stupid cocksucker. Let me just ask: were you stupid enough to pay him up-front? Because I think you were. You know, you always were a big dumb shit. I remember when you and my son were nine years old—used to

play on the trampoline in Gator's backyard. You tore a hole clean through the tarp, you tubby bastard."

"What?" Pevy blustered, apparently confused. "Have you cracked your nut? The hell're you talking about? You don't have a son!…That was you!"

The icy-hot look Boss dealt him was on the fringe of madness. "Yeah. That's right. And for the record—and of course you already know this, but I didn't kill him. Maybe I should have. Maybe I've been too, too… *benevolent*, especially to people like you."

"What the hell do you want, already?!"

"Where's Althier?"

"I still don't know what you're talking abou—"

Bam. Boss shot him in the other leg without skipping a beat.

"Um," Luth hazarded his input, "I think he only knows him by 'Maroon,' sir."

"Yeah," Boss flippantly agreed, "I figured. I just wanted another excuse to shoot him."

Pevy bucked and thrashed in the chair, which Luth had to hold steady before it overturned. "What

the—fff-fuck! You! *Fuck*!”

“Gosh, such language. I’m not going to ask again. *Where’s Maroon*?”

“I don’t know!” he caterwauled, his complexion as ripe as a tomato. “He’s not my problem! He comes and goes whenever he wants! I haven’t seen him in like two weeks!”

“Oh, that’s such a bad lie. Did you know that centuries ago they used to cut off your nose for lying?” Boss illustrated the thought by leaning over and tracing the tip of his dagger along the ridge of Pevy’s face, leaving a glittering red trail across the freckles and beads of sweat. “I wonder how easy that is, to cut off a nose…”

“Goddamnit, it’s the truth! I swear it!”

“Tch, now you’re swearing. Okay, let’s say that by some miracle of humanity that you’re telling the truth. Now I gotta ask: Why, oh *why* would you help someone like Maroon get the Jewels?”

A wicked grin tamed Pevy’s roaring. “Hah! The Jewels? Help *him*? What makes you think it was his idea? We were in it together! He had the men and the guts, and I had the brains and the guns. We were gonna have the world eating outta the palms of our

hands. Those Jewels have more power in ’em than anyone’s ever held in history! If somebody’s got a hold of those, they can do anything they want! Just like that old wizard Ku—”

Startling even Luth, Boss slapped Pevy savagely with the pistol, screaming, “SHUT UP! Just shut up, you rat bastard!”

Luth grimaced at the epithet. It had been taboo for nearly a century, losing its “political correctness” in the modern world and its anti-racism trends. It was actually offensive to call a Burmecian a “rat” at all, though Luth wasn’t so naive to expect not to hear it, often behind his back. It was a little ridiculous, but despite everything he never expected Boss to be *that* crass—then again, it was probably a more innocuous expression in the age he grew up in.

“What did you think he was gonna do once he got the Jewels? Just hand them over to you, share nicely and have a goddamn world domination tea party? He ran off with them!”

Pevy sneezed something bloody through his broken nose and kept sneering. “No thanks to you! You and your—your damn flunkies! If you hadn’t busted up their ring at Burmecia, at least one of us

would know where the Jewels are now! I had a guy on it!”

“Oh, fuck you!” Boss shot Pevy in the arm, adding further injury to insult.

“Ahhhhhhrrgggh *you bitches*!!”

“Yeah, it hurts, doesn’t it?!” he fired back, maniacally loud. ‘Maybe you’ll think twice before pumping people that walk through your door full of lead.’ He slammed the pistol flush onto the desk and jumped off, storming away. “Let’s go, Lu.”

Luth scurried after him, abandoning the duct-taped Pevy in his chair. He didn’t want to stick around any second longer than necessary.

“Wait!” Pevy whined after them. ‘Wait, you assholes!’ He was frothing like a hot kettle, three different shades of red painting his face and bullet-pocked, sandy suit. “What’re you gonna do, just leave me here to die??”

“No,” the Genome replied, clear and calm and more vindictive than ever. “I’ve got a better idea.” And slammed the door.

12. Ultima's Revenge

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It wasn’t until he was kneeling over the body of the guard he trampled on the way in that the full scope of the last ten minutes hit him.

He was just *shot at*. And he didn’t get hit—or maybe he did, but the dim surroundings and vestigial adrenaline throbbing under his skin didn’t allow him a good sense of the damage yet. He could at least say he was still standing, so nothing fatal hit him.

But Boss was shot, too. Fatally. And he lived. Actually, he seemed to be in better shape than Luth. And then Boss shot Pevy—not fatally, but it was still gruesome. He could very well bleed to death in his office, and judging by Boss’s attitude, that would be fine with him.

Luth wasn’t quite as complacent with the killing business, especially with the thought that the four guards they encountered might be dead.

‘This one still has a pulse.’ Okay, three guards might be dead, but those were Boss’s. It was a

downright *miracle* that Luth survived that episode without killing anyone in return. He'd never slain a man before, not even days before in Burmecia, when he sincerely could've. He didn't really want to start. He wouldn't call himself a pacifist, but he wholly believed that being a Dragon Knight was about *protecting* king and country, not slaughtering—even if it was a bunch of low-life, gun-toting thugs and thieving ninjas. He wasn't a bloodthirsty warrior yet.…*Yet?*

"What's wrong, rookie? You're awfully quiet."

Luth broke free of his musing, brushed off his knees and stood back. "I'm just a little shell-shocked, sir."

One foot in the lamplight and the rest cloaked in shadows, Boss looked like a darkmoon phantom, a figment of too many stories about monsters from the backside of the heavens. He gesticulated in ghostly wisps and raved, "You? You didn't get shot! You can't wash bullet holes out of shirts, you know. You weren't scared of Pevy, were you? He's just a bag of hot air."

Luth didn't want to admit it, but he was actually more afraid of Boss. "So, sir, you told Pevy you have an idea?" he enquired, testing the crazy waters

to find out what suicidal melee Boss was about to dive into, next.

“Oh.” He rubbed his chin, a grin crawling up his face like a serpent. ‘Yeah, yeah I do, sorta. It’s gonna take a little while to work out. We’ll start on that first thing in the morning.’ He stuck a thumb towards the black hole of an exit. “How’s about we call it a day?”

Relieved, Luth nodded. “Perfectly fine by me, sir.”

While they tip-toed their way through the blind tunnel, mindful of the crunching bits, Luth remembered to ask, “Why did you have to shoot these lights out like that, sir? Why didn’t you just fire at Pevy’s men instead?”

“I didn’t want to shoot them. I said I don’t like guns. I’m not a very good shot, anyway. If I missed, then they’d have a clear shot, and we’d have no cover. I wanted to confuse them long enough to get in close and disarm them.”

“Oh.” Luth had underestimated his capacity for mercy—another slight reassurance. “I guess that almost makes sense, sir.”

“Thank you, I work very hard at my excuses. Besides, wasn’t my way more fun?”

“I think you should just thank the gods Pevy didn’t shoot you in the head, sir.”

“I could’ve taken it,” he assertively quipped.

Luth didn’t want to imagine it. “I think I have glass in my foot,” he complained instead.

“Anyway,” Boss finished his thought, “Somebody’s got to wake up and take Pevy’s pumpkin ass home. My evil plan won’t work if he just rots down here.”

“You have an *evil plan*, sir?” Luth pressed, naturally incredulous.

“All the greats do,” he confirmed, and never elaborated.

Luth only concerned himself with the bigger picture. “Didn’t you kinda blow your cover back there, sir? Aren’t you worried that Pevy is going to figure out your secret?”

“At this moment in time, quite frankly, Lu, I don’t give a damn. Besides, there’s not a thing Pevy can do about dick.”

Luth braced himself for more perturbed stares from Gatortown's denizens as Boss strutted across the plaza ahead of him. By the time they left the sneering, drunken crowds behind, Luth was surprised that not one had risen to strike them, or at least protest. He wondered if they really thought Boss was responsible for Don's death—or if they knew what he'd just done to Pevy. Probably not, but Luth was glad that looks could not, in fact, kill.

They emerged topside to an orange sunset, scattered across Lindblum's sharp spires like rays of fire through a ruby prism. Boss winced at the daylight, replaced his sunglasses and hunted down a taxi that would take them away from public eyes—they must have been a wretched sight, caked in sewage and blood. They found a cab driver who asked too many questions in one silent gape, but once Boss said he wasn't going to repeat himself, no further directions were necessary.

It was like that the rest of the way home, and it was a wonder they made it back to their apartments without having to answer to anyone. At the end of the road and ready to end the day, Luth sighed heavily and paced to his door, by now too aware of the warm, icky trickle down his foot.

Boss finally noticed the bloody paw-prints trailing the Burmecian and exclaimed, “Whoa, Lu, are you limping?”

“Huh?” Luth glanced back, and in a heartbeat Boss was crouched at his feet, poking around the sore. “Oh man, you took one. Com’on, let’s go inside and I’ll fix you up.”

Luth wearily shook his head. “Oh no sir, it’s okay, I don’t need…” Before his modesty knew how to object, the door was open and Luth was being pushed inside. Boss jumped straight into the bathroom and started digging up supplies. “Sit tight! I’ve got just the thing.”

“Sir, really…” Luth whined half-heartedly, not really grudging an order to sit down and relax. He lobbed his halberd into the corner, plopped onto the bed and gingerly peeled off his footwear. Boss reappeared with a damp towel and a bottle of peroxide, and fussed until Luth was rightly propped up and comfortable, pillows and all.

“Sir, you really don’t need to…” Luth lamely tried again, feeling silly under the pampering.

“Hey, hush,” Boss insisted as he dabbed away the blood around the singed gash on Luth’s ankle. It

wasn’t too deep—it barely struck bone, but it would turn nasty without treatment. On cue came the peroxide, and the Burmecian squeaked an anthem before it was done with him. “Oh, stop crying. It’s just a little disinfectant,” Boss teased him.

“It burns worse than the bullet, sir—and I’m not crying,” he pouted, though his eyes were stinging traitorously.

“Heh. Well, here comes the fun part.” Boss cradled his leg and lowered his gaze, his expression lost in a dream. He began to mumble things outside Luth’s comprehension, even with his acute hearing, and then a strange shiver skittered up his spine. He could feel a cool tingling around his leg, and when he looked…

Luth’s eyes bulged in amazement. It was—it was some *light*, white and bright and out of nothing. It was silent and lighter than air, not even rustling his clothes, yet somehow solid, like a bundle of luminescent snakes. The threads coiled around his ankle, tied in knots over the wound and then dissipated into aether, leaving no trace at all—except a perfectly sealed cut, only the faintest scar left in its stead.

Luth breathlessly worked his jaw around his astonishment. “You—that—was—did you…?” He met Boss’s smug grin and then realized in a flash of written memory, “You know white magic?”

He shrugged. “A little. It’s been a while since I’ve used it. I’m pretty rusty.”

“Did Queen Garnet teach you, sir?” Luth wondered, incredibly intrigued.

Boss bit his lip, shied away and started wrapping up the things he’d picked out of the bathroom. Luth’s raised brow dropped with a pang of guilt. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Don’t apologize. That all better?” he asked, affably changing the subject.

Luth flexed his foot—not a single hitch or ache to be found—and nodded gratefully. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“Good! I’m not *that* rusty, then.” He rose and put everything back in its place. Luth blanched at the crimson spots Boss tracked across the beige carpet.

“Um, sir…?”

He turned back, and at Luth’s unnerving stare he asked, “What? Is there something on my face?”

“S-sir,” he stammered, shaken with the fact that, “You’re still bleeding…”

Boss smirked, as if they were merely talking about wet hair or dirty boots. “No shit?” He suddenly shucked off his jacket, spun around and lifted his shirt. “Hey, do me a favor and check my back. Did they go through?”

Luth gasped at the display. Three bloody craters, one to match each pinhole in front, tore up the falcon’s pale red wings, lending to the disaster of antique scratches and blotches that mussed up the tough flesh. “W-what?”

“The bullets, Lu,” Boss petulantly stressed. “Did they go all the way through me? I don’t have eyes in the back of my head—I can’t tell.”

“O—ah, ah… y-yes, sir, I think so. There were only three, right?”

“Yeah.” He smoothed his tattered shirt back down and rolled his shoulders. ‘Alright, that’s good.’ Then, to Luth’s horrified reaction, “Lu, relax. I’m fine. The bleeding’ll stop in a minute.”

Luth gulped, clearing his composure. “I know, sir, it just… freaks me out.”

“Heh, you get used to it.”

“You get shot at often, sir??”

“Ah, no, but I meant stuff like this in general, heh.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

“Are you kidding? Like hell. I’m about to hock up that muffin you gave me. But I’ll be okay; I’ll just walk it off.” He panned a disappointed look around the undecorated flat. “Geez, you haven’t done shit with the place.”

“I like it the way it is…” Luth couldn’t believe he was blushing. Why? He was never shy with Boss, and he was unbearable, sometimes. At least Boss couldn’t see it for all the fur. “Why don’t you use some white magic on yourself, too?”

He shrugged off the suggestion. “Nah. Don’t worry about me. Just chill and rest your feet. G’night, Lu.”

Luth couldn’t even reply, “Good night, sir,” before Boss was out the door. He sat up in bed a minute longer, contemplating his day through the blank TV screen on the wall, when he realized Boss

had completely skirted his promise regarding Lady Freya.

“Hey!”

“Do you know the standard sentence in Lindblum for being caught selling dusters?”

Luth found Boss awake early the next morning (ten o’clock—early for *him*.) He was bustling with energy, just not his usual sunny, outgoing sort—it was something darker and more focused.

Boss took him to the record rooms on the fifth floor, where Sheryl had once shown him how to access the files on every transit the company’s central branch cleared, among other things. The entire floor was covered by two large, shallow rooms that were filled to the brim with bookshelves and boxes, like some prosaic hybrid of a warehouse and a library. A closed corner offered some computers, but they skipped straight to the aisles of dust-laden ticket stubs.

Boss poked along the top shelf and Luth held the ladder steady, while a pair of dead fluorescent bulbs supervised overhead. He didn’t know what they

were looking for, and Luth was afraid that if he asked, Boss would reply that he didn't know, either.

They had to have been the only ones in the entire room, else Boss might not have so openly ranted, "Or hell, just weed—*just* for shelling out a few blades of grass."

"No, s—"

"Three years. For dusters? Depends on the amount you're caught with, but usually five-to-ten. And that's not just Lindblum—Alexandria, Burmecia, the Dwarven Provinces, even Her Majesty's colonies in Salvage—that's the law these days. But do you know the penalty for trafficking those same drugs across the borders? Just a typical ship from Don's dusterhouses in Alexandria through South Gate? You get caught with that shit, it's twenty-five-to-life."

He hopped off the ladder, scooted it a few feet down and then returned to his perch, his tail fastened around one of the creaky wooden rungs. "So, the way it works is that if one of Leo's 'dealer daddies' or whatever-the-fucks get busted on the street, they get five years in jail. Even if the Regs get off their donut asses and raid one of their storehouses—

someone like Leo? Fifteen years—well, probably twenty for him. Tops. And with parole."

He plucked a punchcard from a cardboard box, turned it over, bit down on a corner until his teeth left marks and then replaced it. "But if one of my ships gets busted on the way to those storehouses? And it leads back to me? And it *will*, because that's where the buck goes—I get *life*, in one of Lindblum's top-of-the-line, maximum-security 'bark like my bitch' prisons."

With one hand braced on the shelf and his legs tangled in the flimsy steps, Boss swung off the side of the ladder, leaned towards Luth and bluffly said, "Do you know how long a life sentence would be for me? *Eternity*." He shrugged his free shoulder. "Of course, I'd break out long, long before then, but that's not the point. Everything I worked for here would go down the shitter. You'd think I was getting a handsome cut for all that risk, but it's just five percent."

Luth crinkled his brow as Boss climbed back up and continued thumbing through tickets. "So why __"

"So why, do you ask, would I do this? I don't need any damn mob cred, or their drug money. It's

just the principle, Lu. If an honest, decent man—hell, even if an *indecent* motherfucker wants to sit back and toke it up once in a while, who the fuck really cares? Why does it have to be illegal? Shit, more people fuck up, get hurt and start riots just from drinking *beer*; why isn't alcohol illegal? Because they say it's easier to tell if someone's drunk than if they're high? What does that even mean? You know, it's just the government trying to __"

He abruptly pulled himself back, cutting off the tirade. "You know what? I'm not even going there. Drugs are bad, rookie. The point is that I'm being a nice guy for these cuntwaffles so they can bum my rides, and as usual some stupid motherfucker is taking me for granted. Haven't they ever heard of biting the hand that feeds you?"

"You say that one person is Pevy, then?" Luth tried to steer their conversation in a relatively sane direction.

Boss reconsidered himself. "Well, Pevy—actually, I don't even let Pevy… It's kinda complicated, Lu. You don't need to know the details."

“I think I’m already involved, sir,” Luth begged to differ. “You might as well tell me.”

“Fair ’nuff. Pevy *has* been using the company, even though he’s not supposed to—I told you I hate guns. But he’s been stealing Leo and Armond’s routes.”

“He has? But I thought his specialty was arms dealing, sir. Leo and Armond are the ones who deal with the… you know.”

“Exactly. Pevy’s trying to get a piece of the drug market, since it’s obviously more profitable.”

“I see. What makes you realize this just now, sir?”

“I’ve known for months; I just haven’t given a shit until now.”

Luth scratched one ear as the other tried to wrap around his head, confounded. “Um, explain, sir?”

“Here, um…” He whipped out a slip of paper from the adjacent drawer, laid it flush against the top of a filing cabinet and then patted his pockets fruitlessly. “Shit. Got a pen?”

Luth produced one from his own pocket and lent it to him (it was hardly the first time Boss required

this service). He scrawled out an eager note, signed it simply, “Boss,” and then passed it all back to Luth. “Quick, go down and give this to Sheryl.”

Luth inspected the memo, first. It was a list of familiar names following the ambiguous label, “File 24.”

“What’s this, sir?”

“Oh, this is rich,” Boss uttered as he pawed his way to the bottom of a cardboard box, totally lost to Luth. “This is freakin’ brilliant. Those swarmy sons of bitches. They tried the same damn thing last time, too.”

“Uh, sir?” Luth spoke up, trying to pull him back to the present. “What’s this list? What are you planning to do?”

“Huh?” Boss popped back with a blink, seemingly surprised to see Luth there. “Oh. Those guys are all fired, for starters.”

Luth gasped at the decree. “What? You mean this list? You’re just going to fire all these people? What for?”

“They’re the other bosses’ ‘inside guys.’ Cleaning them out is going to stir up a big shitstorm

in Gatortown, but keeping them here is more of a liability now. Heh, not like it matters what I do to them anymore. They already want me out of the picture."

"You mean you have some of Pevy's men working for this company?" Luth couldn't hide his alarm.

"Not anymore. And Leo and Armond's guys, too."

Luth examined the roster more closely, morbid curiosity fishing for acquaintances. "Oh no, not Pat, sir," he petitioned.

"Yeah, Armond's boy. Gotta be done," Boss lamented. He drummed his fingers on that note, snatched the memo back and tacked on two more names. "And while I'm at it, these two are out the door, as well."

"Hmm?" Luth didn't recognize the additions, but he had to ask, "Why?"

"Stev Cobbleston is Pevy's little gopher. He's been taking duster packs from Leo's ships and then fucking with the ledgers to make it look like we either dropped them or the labs fell short. I know he wasn't with Pevy when I hired him, so I guess he got

recruited a couple of months back. That's when I figured him out, anyway."

"I barely understood that, but are you saying Pevy's been using him to steal from Leo, with the company as an intermediate?"

"You're picking it up."

"I think you mean he's a mole, not a gopher, sir."

"They're both fat rodents in holes, same difference."

"If you've known about this for months, why haven't you done anything before now?"

"Why? Like I really give a shit if Pevy's trying to nose in on Leo's business. Armond's been doing it forever without anyone even catching a whiff. And he's *smart* about it, too. See, all of Leo's dusters are made in this pothole in Alexandria called Dali, in the basement of a painting supplies factory—you ever heard of Kaliroth Paints?"

Luth startled, vaguely impressed. Kaliroth was an extremely common, cheap brand, and it was hard to believe that such a mundane name was connected to Leo's… enterprises. "Why yes, sir."

“Well, that’s all Don’s. Or it was, anyway—I guess Leo’s running it, now. You see, paint thinner is one of the by-products of dusters, though in really small amounts—I’m talkin’ micrograms. But what’s great about it is that it’s so pungent, if you manufacture a whole bunch and pack the dusters inside one of the crates, not a drug dog in the world can sniff out the difference. So—”

“But what if they do a full inspection, not just a superficial examination?” Luth had the official Lindblum customs handbook practically memorized; he read one on a long flight to the Outer Continent, once. (‘Mother of Mist, what the hell are you reading? It better have titties.’ “Not exactly, sir, but it teaches you how to search a lady’s bosom for weapons and drug paraphernalia.”)

“Eh? Oh, right. Well, customs normally won’t do that unless they’re suspicious, and if they do, well…”

Luth’s muzzle rumpled with an abhorrent thought. “You don’t try to bribe them, do you, sir?”

“God no, though I like the way you’re starting to think.” Luth sniffed at the perverse compliment as Boss elaborated, “You can never bribe a customs officer, Lu. Last guy that tried had his balls stamped,

‘return to sender.’ Really though, there’s five packs to a box, twenty boxes to a crate and ten crates to a ship. The odds of having those five boxes of Leo’s picked out are fairly slim. You just roll with it and hope you’re lucky. These sorts of things always come with some risk. That’s why Don counted on me so much.”

“…Oh.” Luth swallowed his nervous imagination. “I see, sir.”

“So, once the shipment clears South Gate and makes it to central, one of Leo’s guys heads up to the docks and sorts out which boxes go to department stores and stuff—you know, the real paint and all that crap—and which boxes go to Leo’s so-called ‘stores’—the dusters, of course. That’s how it was supposed to work, anyway. Pat does the same thing for Armond and his grass. The only difference between the boxes with dusters and the boxes with grass is that the labels turn green or red when you give them a lil’ scratch with a special marker—the guys in Don’s labs make this shit up, they’re brilliant, I swear. They could’ve been rocket scientists or cured cancer or someshit, but I suppose they’re making more money in the drug business—hell, I can’t blame them. Anyway, Pat takes a couple

of packs of dusters—not whole bunch at a time, just one or two—and sends them out in a paint box."

"Wait, to the department stores? Why? Don't they *not* want the dusters to get mixed up with the paints?"

"Aha, that's the smart part. If Leo notices that he's a pack short—and he usually doesn't, since it's just one pack—but if he did, and he wanted to search Armond's lot, he wouldn't find anything, so it would look like Ricky's mistake. Meanwhile, Pat holds on to the tracking numbers of the paint shipment and follows the box to whichever store it ends up at—"

"And takes it from there?"

"Exactly. I'm not sure how—he either steals it off the truck or buys it out of the store owner's pocket, whichever works for him. Then he brings it to Armond and they throw it out on the streets, raking up a little extra cash on the side of their usual—and some cans of paint, I guess. Hell knows what they do with it. But Don never had a clue."

"Wow. How did you learn all this, sir?"

Boss cocked a haughty pose. "Please, bitch, I know everything." At Luth's bemused smirk he

dropped the airs and admitted, “Pat and I got wasted together one night and he just spilled everything. I didn’t even *ask*.”

“I can sadly see that happening, sir,” Luth wryly commented.

“Anyway, it wasn’t my problem until Ricky started whining at me for loans to cover his clueless ass. *Somebody* had been taking too many cookies out of the jar—I’m talking whole *boxes* at a time. I wasn’t *quite* sure Pat was stupid enough to do it, so I dug a little deeper. I found a bunch of data correction forms under Kaliroth Paints with Stev Cobbleston’s signature on it, and it didn’t take too long after that to make the link to Pevy—actually, looking back on it now, it makes me sick.”

“Why is that, sir?”

“Because every single box that Stev transferred was picked up and signed for by an ‘M.T.’ Now think, Lu; who do we know working close to one of the bosses that might possibly have those initials?”

“Um…” Luth’s ears spun in jerks around the riddle. “M.T? Leo has Ricky, and it’s not Pat, and not…” The meaning hit him like a slap in the face. “Oh gods, *Maroon*.”

Boss's knuckles turned white around the name, and he nodded grimly. "That's right. Anyway, I coulda said something to Ricky then, but it would've started too much bullshit to be worth it."

"Of course," Boss retracted, "Now that all this shit has hit the fan, I've got no excuse *not* to do something about Cobbleston. He must think he's a slick undercover motherfucker because I haven't paid attention to him, but that shit's about to come to a screeching halt."

"And what about Norris Beltino?" Luth enquired for the last one on the list.

Boss shrugged. "Eh, he's just a douchebag."

Luth turned up an indignant frown. "Sir…"

"Man!" He slapped the nearest countertop, jolting Luth and sending a few loose sheets of paper twirling to the floor. "Where are they? I can't believe they got re-filed. I shoulda kept them in my desk."

"Um, kept what in your desk, sir?" Luth asked meekly, the memo temporarily forgotten.

"Those DC forms! I need them for evidence, damnit," Boss grumbled, frustrated with himself. He

slid to the floor and dragged the ladder to the next aisle. Luth followed, offering docile encouragement as they scoured another tower of boxes.

“I think this might be it,” Boss eventually remarked at an unmarked folder, and as he skimmed through the contents he began to whistle an optimistic tune. “You ever got a song stuck in your head, Lu?”

Luth shook his head. “No sir, can’t say I have.”

Boss frowned. “Really? Not even a song you like?”

“I don’t listen to a lot of music, sir,” he confessed.

“For serious?” He rolled his eyes. “What am I saying? You’re always serious. That’s a pity, Lu. A man should appreciate some good music once in a while. It’s food for the soul.”

“If you say so, sir,” Luth said neutrally, dropping it.

Boss eyed the offhanded memo critically. “Hey, didn’t I tell you to take that to Sheryl like ten minutes ago?”

Luth finally remembered the slip of paper in his hand. “Oh! Sorry, sir.” He sprinted off, Boss calling after him, “I’ll meet you down there in a bit!”

To say Sheryl was suspicious was a bit of an understatement. Luth pleaded ignorance on the “who” s and “why” s and let her take the memo at face value.

“Is there something going on that you’re not telling me?” she asked leerily, and Luth bit his lip, desperately wanting to say—that Lindblum was in danger, that the world was in danger, that he’d fallen in with the wrong crowd, the wrong job, working for an illegal man who might be legally insane, and he was crazy too, for wanting to help.

It wasn’t until she asked that he was finally afraid.

Then Boss showed up, a rogue grin on his lips and an innocent manila folder in his hands, and Luth forgot himself again. “’sup, babe?” he purred over her desk.

“Just you,” she snipped, and waved the slip under his nose. “I see this love note you sent me. Is there

anything else I need to know before I send a report to human resources? Something like, oh, say, *valid reasons for termination*?”

“Ach, that’s all semantics,” he frivolously batted it back. ‘They know what for.’ He dropped the folder into her arms. “Do me a favor and hold on to that, will ya? Someone’s going to come by later for it. Lu and I are going to step out for a while.”

Sheryl accepted the bundle, one aloof-yet-skeptical eyebrow raised. “Oh? You know, I can’t help but notice that you’ve been making some interesting changes around here lately.”

The smile Boss returned was very… solemn. “Oh, the most interesting change is yet to come.”

Before Luth or even Sheryl knew what to ask, Boss was briskly guiding him out the front doors. “Don’t wait up for us!”

“I never do,” Sheryl retorted, her voice clear and lofty across the foyer.

They raced diagonally and wrongways over crosswalks and around disgruntled motorists, arriving at Fabool Square in record time and

violating at least three pedestrian laws. Luth was skipping in circles and waving flustered apologies to passers-by, as if clearing a path for a rabid dog.

Boss tempered his pace once he reached the plaza, minding not to trample the flowerbeds. It was only once Luth escaped the urban bedlam and caught up with him that he managed to ask, “Where in the world are we going, sir?”

His question was trampled under Boss’s feet, which blazed across the red bricks, around the high-nosed statue of Cid IX and straight to their banal destination: a phone booth. Pigeons nested in the crooked “telephone” sign atop the transparent box scattered as he wrenched open the lime-frosted glass door and entered.

“Um…” Luth stood witlessly outside.

“Don’t stand out there all slack-jawed, Lu,” Boss eventually acknowledged him. “Come in.”

Luth wiggled in after him, dipping his ears so not to rustle the cobwebs on the ceiling. “Now what, sir?” he tried again, still ruffled by their flaunt through rush hour traffic.

Boss withdrew a folded scrap of paper, unfurled it with one hand and picked up the phone’s handset

with the other. “I’m going to put on my cape and go fight crime,” he chaffed. When the joke bounced off Luth’s blunt, inquiring stare, Boss condescended, “There’s a phone. I’m going to use it to call people.”

The Burmecian smirked, not amused. “I can figure that out sir, thanks. Who are you calling? When are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“Revenge is an ugly thing, Lu,” Boss didn’t answer. “That is why it should only be carried out by professionals.”

“I can already say I don’t approve, sir.”

“That is exactly why I’m not telling you.”

Luth made a plaintive grunt, and Boss relented, “It’s just finishing some old business. I’m going to put a stop to all the bullshit in Gatortown *and* get back at Pevy at the same time.”

“How are you going to do that at a payphone? *Why* are we at a payphone? Don’t you have a cell phone, sir?”

Boss snorted. “Are you kiddin’? If I had a cell phone, it would be buzzin’ my ass off all day. I pay chicks in hot little business suits to take care of that

stuff for me. Besides, these calls need to be totally incognito—none of that ‘call tracking’ crap.”

“Why?”

“Because!” He dug a fountain of small change out of his pockets and attempted to sort it in his palm, the handset now wedged awkwardly between his shoulder and ear. ‘Pence, bit, bit… no quarters?’ He dropped his arms and rolled his eyes, exasperated. “I have millions of gil in the bank and not one goddamn quarter in my pocket. Lu, spot me some silver. I’ll pay you back.”

Luth’s wallet handily supplied the quarters, which trickled down the coin slot like prayers down a wishing well. Luth hoped for a blessing of sanity while Boss studied the phone numbers splattered on the paper, one finger suspended over the console’s keypad. “You know,” he hesitated, “If I really wanted to, I could just call the Regs and spill everything I know about all these dickwads. Cops would be breaking down their doors so fast their tails would corkscrew off their asses.”

“Then why *don’t* you, sir?” That sounded like the most reasonable action, which was why Luth’s gut was certain Boss wouldn’t take it.

“Because A: I’ve been implicated with these guys so long I’d be going straight behind bars with them, and B: It’d never work like that. The bosses know the cops, they know the public prosecutors—hell, I think Leo has a damn judge out there. Gatortown doesn’t stink because it’s a sewer, Lu—it’s because it has its fingers all up in Lindblum’s ass, like a puppet. So even if the cops had the balls to pick up the bosses, those fat cats would just put on a pissing show for the public, walk through a lot of bullshit paperwork and head back to their huge mansions at the end of the day. Didn’t you ever see the Boss Taron trial? One big fuckin’ joke.”

He frowned a pinch, realizing, “I guess it was before your time. Anyway, never call the cops for anything. You want something done about someone, you’ve gotta do it yourself. I knew a guy, real nice, but picked up some bad friends. Those friends got shit-faced one night and showed up at his house, screaming and tearing up the place, waking up his kids, all that fun stuff—remember what I said about bringing hookers to your place? So the guy called the cops on ’em, stood outside by the road to wait for ’em, and once the fuzz showed up they arrested *him*. For assault. On the crazy bitches trashing his

house. How the hell does that happen?! Fuck the cops, Lu.”

That said, Boss turned back to the dial-pad with point-blank conviction. “Now, take notes; this is how you get real justice.”

Luth stood back (as far as he could in the cramped booth) and tilted an apprehensive ear towards the receiver as Boss punched up the first number on his list. He heard two warbling rings before a squeaky voice broke through, and then all Luth could decipher was Boss’s end of the conversation.

“Ricky? Hey, it’s Ultima.… Yeah, I know, dead man talkin’. Listen, this conversation isn’t happening, okay?… No, it’s—no, it’s not… I didn’t kill Don! Look, that’s not even important right now. This is about those feather dusters you wanted a loan on a couple of months back.… No, I know, I know. Don’t worry about that right now. I wanted to let you know I found them.… Yeah, all five. I’m going to tell you where to look, but first I need a small favor.… Oh give me a break, you’re probably sitting in a Crisp’n’Coffee right now, dunking donuts. I just want to know where Pevy is.…Ahaha, so I guess you heard about that, huh? Aw, it was nothin’.…

Over your head, Ricky. Just tell me, is he home?… Awesome, thanks. Listen, just—yeah—go to central—I won't be there, but ask for Sheryl, and tell her to let you see file DC1337.… DC1337.… Yeah, you got it. I think if you read the tag it's gonna be…… Yeah, it's… I think you'll find it interesting.… Yeah, it's no prob. Make sure Leo gets it, and remember, you didn't talk to me, okay?… Of course! See ya."

Boss depressed the switch hook and held still for a slow minute, lost in thought until a cat's grin carved up his mien. "Ahaha! Idea," he announced, and without elaborating, he dragged out the phone book tucked under the console and handed it off to Luth, demanding, "Look up Lindblum PD."

"The police?" Luth resounded, befuddled. "I thought you just said to never call the cops for anything."

"Oh, yeah, well…" He blithely shrugged. 'Do as I say, not as I do.' Luth acquiesced and called out the number. As it rang, Boss passed him a mischievous wink. "(Watch this.) Hey, Lindblum Police? Can I speak to a detective?… Alas, on hold."

Boss impatiently drummed his fingers on the glass wall of the booth while Luth murmured, "What

in the world…?" to himself.

"Yes, who? Detective Charim? Nice to meet you. Listen, I'd like to call in a bomb threat.… Where? That's a spoiler, but I can give you a hint: it's in one of the city's public schools.… Hehehe, why would I joke about the fates of possibly hundreds of innocent children? That would be terrible if you hung up on me—and so many young lives—because you couldn't take a bomb-planting maniac seriously. I mean, hell, I tested this thing in the junkyard—it can blow up six cars and an air cab at once! It's pretty sweet.… Of course not. Can't just give you everything.…Oh, okay, one more thing: it *might* be in the School District.… Ahahaha. Yes, that is a lot of ground to cover! Gee, I'm not gonna envy your bomb squad. I'll tell you what would be nice, though. If you bring six million gil—hard cash—to the corner of Abbot and Green by two o'clock, I think I can be persuaded to give you some more hints. Hell, I might even be a nice guy and disarm the thing. That's two o'clock. Buh-bye."

Luth's jaw fell on page 52 of the directory. "*Oh my God*."

"Ahaha!" Boss cackled. "I am an *evil genius*."

“What have you done?!” his partner wailed, his ears wilting and his pupils shrinking into pinheads amid the horror-washed whites of his eyes.

Boss snickered at him. “Relax, there’s no bomb! Ahaha, the look on your face, though, it’s great.”

Luth’s right ear ticked in spasms as he spit hysterically, “You—what—WHY?”

Boss held up one steadfast finger. “Diversion. The fastest way to get every fire department, bomb squad, police officer, ambulance, news reporter and parent in the city to simultaneously shit their pants is to make them think something’s going to blow up at a school. You can go to jail just for joking about it. Classes are going to get locked up, kids are going to be bunkered in, parents are going to start riots outside the gates and authorities are going to swarm every single inch of every single school until they figure out it’s a hoax. It’ll take them *hours*. And if a real emergency happens in the meantime? Well, it’s going to be tough shit for them, because all the response teams are tied up.”

He rubbed his chin, hummed and donned a sly grin. “You know, if we wanted to rob a bank, now would be a great time.”

“I don’t think so, sir!” Luth fiercely rejected that caprice.

Boss chuckled playfully. “Are you sure? It’d be thrilling.” Sobering a notch, he picked the phone back up and inserted another quarter. “Okay, I gotta admit it wasn’t necessary. I wasn’t even sure it would work. But hell, those kids should thank me; they’re getting a holiday. And now we don’t have to worry about the cops getting in the way!”

“Getting in the way *of what*?” Luth strained, but Boss ignored him, going straight back to business.

“Quick, look up the number for Pizza Shack.”

“Pizza Shack,” Luth echoed flatly, not believing his ears.

“Yeah yeah, make it quick! Stop looking at me like that and do it.”

Luth consulted the book, numbly recited the info and waited for Boss to… do whatever. He no longer knew what to say, and it was far too late to stop him.

“Oh, this is pathetic,” Boss complained as the other end rang and rang. “This one’s taking the longest to answer. Com’on, pick up…” He glanced

to Luth and asked while he waited, “You like sausage or pepperoni?”

“I’m… you…” He blinked his shaken mind back into synch. “You’re ordering a pizza,” he declared the obvious.

“Yeah.” Boss tipped one irked brow at his bewilderment and said, “Relax, Lu. It’s a pizza, not a bomb.”

“Why are you ordering *pizza* at a time like this?”

“Because I am *starving*,” Boss tersely retorted, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. ‘Ah! Yes, I’d like to make a order for delivery. 5212 Stepmire Lane, Residential District.… Phone number?’ He skewed the paper note in his hand to read the number on the edge. “82-24-16-12.… One pepperoni, medium. Actually, make that large. No wait, medium. Yeah. And one of those sodas that go with it.… Great, thanks.”

Boss hung up and grumbled, “Forty-five minutes, holy shit. This better be the best pizza in the goddamn world.”

Luth wrung his thick hands nervously. “Um, I think we need to get away from here soon, sir. The police *do* know how to track calls from payphones.”

Boss was unperturbed. “Yeah I know, just a sec, one more. This’ll be the icing on the cake.”

Luth whimpered futilely in his corner while the last number was dialed.

“Eriquie? Caibon! Gari—jer, jer, tam Ultima.” Boss once again astonished Luth by launching into some exotic, if amiable, dialogue. “Krichi me tu arc noch bosen?… Kar, kar. Neio ban grabar. Telemortar Leon?… Jer. Sumon! Supo nor, garqamon barra doco, ah, ah… crepe.… Jer. Ti ger lata supor?… Teire, teire, yir tis.”

He mentioned during a sudden lull, “The housemaid put me on hold. Erique is such a sweetheart.”

“You… speak Estgazan?” Luth’s wonder had yet to cease.

“And High Dwarven, too.” In response to Luth’s gawking, he pejoratively remarked, “Are you *that* surprised?”

Luth dazedly shook his head. “Nothing’s going to surprise me anymore, sir.”

The receiver at length buzzed with a male voice. Boss plainly greeted, “Hey, Armond. It’s me,

Ultima."

Luth overheard a very distinct, "*You should be dead!"*

"Yeah, I've been hearing that a lot lately. It's okay, I just called to tell you your mother's a whore.… I said your mother is a whore. You know, not the kind that sleeps with strange men for money, just the kind that sleeps with strange men for the hell of it. I guess that's technically a slut. Your mother's a slut, then."

Roiled invective spilled from the receiver while Boss plowed ahead. "Would you like to know how I came to know this about your mother? It's because I slept with her. I had sex with your mother. I wish I could say she was a great lay, but she kinda had these weird posture issues and a back brace and it just made everything awkward, but it was still free and she was pretty hot so I couldn't complain. Say, does she still have that birthmark on her left ass cheek? I think it was a birthmark—it looks like a poodle? It's okay if it's not there anymore; it was thirty-something years ago. Hey, aren't you thirty-something? Huh, that is such a coincidence.… Yeah, I like that sound—the sound you make when you finally shut your mouth. Listen, when you get a

minute you should come over to Pevy's place. We're having pizza. See you in hell, Armond."

The phone chimed a hard note as Boss jammed the receiver back in place. Luth, progressively appalled, could only think to question, "Um, sir, not to be forward, but I thought Genomes couldn't breed with Gaians…?"

"He doesn't know that."

Luth let slip a relieved sigh. "Oh. Well, that's good, sir. So you really didn't sleep with his mother."

"Oh no, that part was true," Boss assured brightly as he pushed past him and out the phone booth, leaving Luth scandalized.

There was a hospitable carpet of grass and a pair of pecan trees on the knoll overlooking 5212 Stepmire Lane. It was within easy view of the property's chalky two-story estate and its rosy brick wall, and ramped off the end of the bulbous cul-de-sac that accommodated two other manors of similar ilk and fortification. The house of interest was garlanded with large, flowery hedges and plump old

trees, and purple vines were aesthetically sculpted along the outer wall. The lawn was vibrant with the aroma and colors of summer, and as hot as the midday sun parked directly overhead.

It was Pevy's home turf, Boss said, and "the perfect spot for a picnic." Luth argued the contrary until the pizza boy came and went, and by then he was too hungry and heat-weary to object. They sat in the pecan-strewn shade, ate lunch and watched an uneventful veranda through the wrought-iron bars of his front gate. The neoclassical facade of Pevy's house looked to be a mile off, by Luth's estimation —though he would admit that he was terrible at estimating.

Luth spent the idle minutes filling his stomach and working his brain, trying to unwrap Boss's scheme. "So basically, sir," he concluded after one last draught of soda, "Your plan is to tell all the bosses about how they've been stealing from each other, and then stand back and watch them fight?"

"That's pretty much it, yeah."

"That seems awfully… I dunno…"

"What? Simple?"

"*Passive-aggressive*, sir."

“Ah. Well.” Boss took the bottle back and slurped up the last drops. “You’re entitled to your opinions, Lu. I respect you for that.”

Dropping out of the nearest tree was some deep, familiar, sardonic voice. “The hell is this?”

“Ahh!” Luth pirouetted off the ground like a dust devil, whirling to meet Griffin, who had seemingly crawled out of the earth.

“Whoa!” Boss twisted to find the intruder, though he didn’t bother getting up. “Geez. You snuck up on us, Am—er, Griffin.”

“W-What do you want?” Luth stammered as he reached over his shoulder for a polearm that was regrettably absent.

Boss remained civil, as if he were entertaining a guest. “I think the better question is, ‘Who sent you?’”

Griffin’s lumpy shoulders rippled with a shrug. He was wearing a leather biker’s jacket and chaps, both black, the sweltering temperatures be damned. Luth paid special notice to his gloves—particularly, the long steel spikes protruding from the knuckles of the left one. “Hrmph. Like I should tell you.”

“Armond,” Boss smugly guessed.

“He said he wasn’t stupid enough to fall for your trap, and sent me instead.”

“He’s still stupid enough to hire *you* to get me, after what happened when Pevy tried to buy my bullet.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I’m not here to take care of *you*.”

This garnered two pairs of raised eyebrows. “Then why are you here?” Luth wondered.

Griffin heavily shuffled past them, down the hill and towards Pevy’s gated driveway, not explaining a thing. As if on a subliminal cue, a sleek black van materialized from the bushy grove around the street corner and glided to a stop right next to him. Three men in dark sunglasses and blue suits filed out the van’s big sliding door, followed by Leo. A keen smirk lit Boss’s features on the appearance of a manila folder under the boss’s arm.

“What’s going on, sir?” Luth quietly asked, sensing an overwhelming need to be discreet.

Boss slunk behind one of the trees and beckoned Luth to do the same. “Shh, just stay back and

watch.”

Leo’s party stood in rank along the sidewalk, staring the outsider down. The demi-lion flicked his nose at Griffin and addressed him in unctuous rhetoric, “What are you doing out here, Griffin? Did Pevy send you to welcome us?”

Griffin stooped slightly, his arms bowed like a great ape. “Believe what you want,” his throat roiled. “I could ask the same to you.”

“We have our own business with Pevy. You can step aside.”

It wasn’t really a suggestion, but Griffin surprised the lot by taking it like one. He backed away from the gate with a lackadaisical gesture. “Be my guest.”

The group exchanged wary looks, yet Leo imperiously strode ahead and rang the pearly buzzer set in the wall. After a stifling wait the intercom crackled some kind of permit and the gate opened with a rusty knell. They entered altogether, Griffin on the fringes of the enterprise.

Pevy rolled up to the scene in a wheelchair, his limbs swaddled in bandages and his spirit as fiery as ever. His escort was a tall, bald bloke Luth recognized right away—he even carried a rifle just

the same as before, only now he sported a livid patch on his scalp and a dainty band-aid across his left temple. Pevy made some blustery proclamations by way of welcome, and in response Leo handed him the mysterious papers. Pevy fumbled through the contents with his good arm while Leo's henchmen gradually encroached, swallowing up the boss's breathing room. Griffin stood tall and stoic to the far side, arms crossed high over his chest.

"Hey, isn't that the folder you gave to Sheryl, sir?"

"That's the one."

"What exactly is in it, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It's all Leo needs to prove that Pevy's been trying to steal his business. Remember, Stev's data correction forms? And some extra stuff, just to drive the point home. You really gotta spell things out for people, sometimes. Man, I wish we were close enough to hear what they were saying."

"So what's going on in there, sir?" Luth asked again.

"No telling, but we're about to get a show. Just watch."

Even if Boss wasn’t able to eavesdrop, Luth tried his luck. His ears tuned to the lawn past the gates, picking up snips and tones to go along with the action. Pevy threw the documents back in Leo’s face, yelling, “fabricated” and “Ultima” in hot succession. Seething words were swatted back and forth until, entirely unprompted, Griffin’s sinewy arms took Pevy’s grunt from behind, snapped his neck in a scissor-swipe and then ripped the rifle off his body before it hit the ground.

“Holy hell,” Boss uttered with dead surprise.

Luth couldn’t believe it; the rest unfolded in under a minute.

The others recoiled a step, stunned, but then Leo’s men overcame their alarm and advanced on Pevy, taking advantage of the situation. Two hoisted the protesting Pevy out of his wheelchair by the arms, and as he cried out in obvious pain, the third threw his fist into Pevy’s abundant gut. Pevy crumpled, kissing the bleached pavement, and Leo closed in to laugh over him, running a suave mitt through his oily black mane. In his writhing disguise, Pevy drew his golden pistol from his boot. An unhesitating burst later, Leo staggered and fell, clutching his blown heart.

A flurry of retaliating knives and pistols manifested, but only one shot reached Pevy before Griffin unloaded his firearm, mowing everyone down like a kid throwing firecrackers into a snake pit. Luth gaped at the massacre, and when he stole a glance at Boss to gauge his reaction, Luth found him wearing a wolf's blood-sated smile.

Drawn to the eruption of gunshot, a woman in a scarlet, sequined dress flew out the front door. She staggered onto the lawn on clunky designer sandals, stopped short of the carnage and screamed. Griffin ignored her, sauntered over to Pevy, kicked him brutally onto his back, planted one foot on his chest and the business end of a clawed gauntlet in his jugular. He held the deathblow for a moment before tearing his arm free, the fatty pulp of Pevy's neck sluicing over the driveway.

Shaking and wailing, the woman lunged at Griffin, fists flailing. The hired gun knocked her down with a callous left backhand, and she didn't get up. Griffin then dropped his looted weapon, rolled the cricks out of his shoulders and plodded out the front gates the way he came, pausing but a second to pass Boss and Luth an inscrutable glare.

“Dear gods…” Luth remembered to breathe in the aftermath, once Griffin had disappeared and a silent pall crept over the neighborhood. “They’re dead. Both of them—I mean, all of them—I mean, just, everyone. Just like that.”

“It would’ve been better if Armond had showed,” Boss chimed in, “But it still worked out pretty well.”

Luth’s trauma was beyond shock, horror and grief, and for the moment he felt so cool and rational it was nearly frightening. “Why was Griffin there? Why did he kill Pevy *and* Leo’s men?”

“I really don’t know, unless *that’s* what Armond hired him to do. Sometimes I don’t think I give that guy enough credit. It’s always the quiet ones, Lu,” Boss said, reverent and cryptic at once.

“How did he know Leo was going to be here, too?”

“I don’t think he did. Griffin’s just that good at improvising.”

Luth swallowed and smoothed the cold fur on the back of his neck, suddenly feeling ill. He didn’t want to be a part of it anymore—Gatortown, Ultima, *anything*.

“Oh cripes, it’s the blondie twins.”

Boss stood and looked down the street, where a moogle swooped in. The Genome tilted his head in wonder and called out, “Wow, Arpy, is that you? What are you doing here?”

Arpy crested the hill and bounced off the pizza box left on the ground, taking it for a seat. “Are you kidding? My ears are fuckin’ everywhere. I had to see what was gonna go down with my own two eyes.” He stuck an accusing digit in Boss’s direction. “I should’ve known you were behind this, you brilliant bastard!”

Boss urbanely flipped his wrist. “Oh Arpy, you give me too much credit. The pieces were already in place. All I had to do was give them a little push.” He dropped the affected manner with a discomfited change of heart. “Huh. Deja-vu. Actually, I feel kinda bad.”

“*Kinda*, sir?” Luth censured his complete lapse of conscience.

Boss shrugged it off. “Yeah. This was way too easy.”

“Well, what the fuck now?” Arpy griped. “The strong arm of the mob has just been laid to fuckin’

waste, no thanks to you. Do you expect me to help clean up after all this shit? My paws are too white to handle you crazy humans, now."

"Eh, it'll work out somehow," Boss flippantly asserted.

"The fuck it will! You know what this is going to do to my clientele? Of course you don't, you monkey fudger. Hey! Are you even listening, bitch?" the moogle went off, but his target was distracted, holding his breath and gazing intently through Pevy's open gate. Before Luth could ask after his intentions, Boss took off towards the house.

"Uh, sir?"

"Stay there! I'll be right back."

"What does he think he's doing?" Luth asked thin air, too addled to pursue him, anyway.

Arpy snorted. "Something dogshit."

Luth watched him skirt the ruinous blanket of corpses and kneel before the hapless woman, who seemed unconscious, at best. Boss delicately picked her up, carried her into the shaded veranda, placed her slack form in a porch swing and then trotted back out of the scene of the crime.

“Okay,” he announced upon return, “That’s—” His thought was interrupted with a greasy belch, and Luth and Arpy flinched in disgust.

“Woo!” Boss grinned and bashfully scratched the back of his head. “Almost as tasty the second time.”

Arpy pinched his nose. “That’s nasty shit. I can’t believe I’m hangin’ with you motherfuckers.” He rose on fluttering wings and began to putter away, ranting towards the horizon, “This is too much crazy, even for me. I didn’t see nothin’, I didn’t hear nothin’, I am o-u-t, out. Gone. Sayonara. Good luck, crackers.”

“Later, Arpy,” Boss genially waved after him, and then turned to Luth with a thoughtful grimace. “Anyway, Lu, I… think we should get out of town for a while.”

13. Seduction of the Innocent

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There were two sides to Treno: the ever-expanding, industrialized sector that scaled the mountain ridges eclipsing the city, and the part less-than-affectionately known as “Old Town.”

The former applied the technological fervor of Lindblum to classic Alexandrian business models-in short, it was a lot of cheap tenements huddling under the feet of textile factories and smoke-stacks that were each one town hall citation away from being condemned.

The latter was populated by centuries-old mansions and boardwalks that refused to die, even as they gradually rotted into the watery grave of the Treno River. Seedy night clubs, tattoo parlors, coffee shops and unmarked taverns grew like mushrooms along the underbelly of the city’s antique castle-estates, where old, wealthy families pretended to hold on to old, noble ideals.

There were two sides to Treno, and both of them were dark.

Luth minded his step over the creaking boards as he navigated beneath the stone bridges of Abbey Canal. Under his feet, inky waters lapped silently at oil-stained brick walls while mirroring the overhead street lamps in rainbow-black splotches. Above, a woman on a billboard beseeching drivers-by to “Save Treno River” was sheered in half, and a curly mustache had been spray-painted under her nose.

A wire trolley rattled over the bridge ahead, nearly drowning out Boss’s introduction. “Welcome to Old Treno, the best place to get away from the law.”

“Isn’t it, ‘to get away from it all’?” Luth questioned the motto.

“You heard me.” Boss skipped up a brick ramp and crossed the overpass, beckoning Luth along. “History lesson, Lu: After the Bloody Revolution back in 1914, things in Treno went from the rich crampin’ the style of the poor to the poor crampin’ the style of themselves. Once a shithole, always a shithole. Gotta love this place.”

Luth glanced around the block, barely making out the blue half-crescent of the moon beyond the fluorescent banners and glaring headlights-just like

Lindblum, there was no room for stars. “Where are we going?”

Boss pointed down the cobbled street at a two-storied shanty with a gaudy neon sign over the porch that depicted a chocoboy boot kicking a bare rump. “To Becca’s Bar & Grill, the best shithole in town.”

—13—

Just like all the other pubs in Boss’s taste, Becca’s bar turned out to be a strip club. Its distinguishing characteristic was its “on the ranch” motif, though Luth didn’t want to visit a chocobo farm where everyone walked around wearing only hot pink, spangled ass-less chaps with silver spurs and streamers. In a warmly lit corner a country-style band played some upbeat, folksy tunes, and on center stage a lady “performed” atop a mechanical bull.

Boss slid up to the bar and took a seat near the end. Luth found a barstool next to him and warily scoped the crowded room. Behind the counter, a small television was mounted above shelves of exotic bottles-The Channel 8 Report was on, of all things. The polished ebony bar curved around the closed-off kitchen and its toasty lights and scents, and on the opposite end a gaggle of men carried on

some loud games. There was ivory clacking on the billiards table, coins were spinning over hands of cards, and the dark floor was cluttered with dining, drinking, roaring patrons.

“What are we supposed to do now, sir?”

“Nothin’. Sit back, relax, enjoy the scenery.” Boss rested his elbows on the counter and watched the show, one lascivious eye on the stage and the other following a waitress that passed close enough for his tail to twitch up her skirt. When she paused to search for a culprit, she found only a draft, a distracted Genome and a Burmecian staring back with a bewildered sort of guilt.

She screwed up her face into a furious scowl just as Luth began to stammer, too late, “W-wait, it wa__”

Smack. Luth’s chair spun from the force of the slap. Once the waitress fixed her apparel and left, Boss cracked a lewd grin. “I still say, Lu, that mankind’s greatest invention is the miniskirt.”

Luth rubbed his sore snout. “That was not nice, sir.”

“I try. Now let that be a lesson to you: never look a mad woman in the eye.” He gestured towards the

platform across the room. “If you want something to watch, there’s plenty of free titties and ass, right up there.”

Luth shied away from the rabble, turning back towards the bar and perching over a bowl of jellybeans. “I, um, think I’ll keep to myself, sir.”

Boss clucked disapprovingly. “Don’t look down on them, Lu-you want to look up for the better view, anyway. But strippers are people, too. Not a one of them wanted to grow up like this. Not at first, anyway. My ex was a stripper, you know.”

“Your ex?” Luth looked up, interested. “The quee-oh, Meridia, you mean?”

He snorted sardonically. “Yes Lu, the Queen of Alexandria used to be a stripper. God damn, I can think of fifty people who would roll in their graves to hear that.”

Embarrassed by his faux pas, Luth looked to the TV for support. It didn’t make him feel any better. “There doesn’t seem to be any more word on the Red Angels, not since they got the Desert Star.”

“How did we get out of there, anyway? I keep forgetting to ask.”

“Same way we got in, sir. I carried you out. The Red Angels killed any guards that would have seen us.”

“Oh. What about your friend? The one you were talking to.”

“Petrov? I don’t know. I hope he’s okay. He said he wasn’t going to tell his supervisor about me.” Luth began to sort the jellybeans by color, popping the red ones into his mouth as he encountered them. Another worriment bubbled to the surface with a gasp. “Oh, I hope he doesn’t think I’m involved.”

Boss frowned, that very thought occurring to him. “Gee, me too. I’m sorry I got you into this. This isn’t what I intended.”

“It’s okay, sir. I just don’t want them to get away with this. I wonder what they’re going to do with the Jewels.”

Neither knew what to say about that, so they let the TV speak for them. Local news segued into global headlines, and in an Act of Irony, Julia appeared to recap Don’s funeral.

Boss playfully poked him. “Hey, there’s your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend…” Luth muttered defensively, like a little boy accused of dealing with ‘cooties.’

Boss held up his hands, backing off. “Alright, alright, if you say so. Are you sure you’re not queer? I have been sensing a profound lack of interest in the opposite sex.”

Luth growled quietly. “It’s not that, sir. And I don’t appreciate having my sexuality questioned. I’m just not like you, or Petrov and his, his… What did he call it? ‘Overactive libido’.”

Boss snatched a jellybean and hooted, “Hah! Your friend can talk to me about his ‘overactive libido’ when he’s been stuck in puberty for a hundred and ninety-two years.” He sighed wistfully at the on-screen obsequies. “Ah, Don, you sorry bastard. You know, a lot of men don’t like funerals because they remind them of their own mortality. I just don’t like ’em cuz they make me jealous.”

“I still can’t believe what happened earlier today,” Luth remarked.

“Don’t feel bad; they brought it on themselves. Classic thugs, the lot of ’em. You know, none of this would’ve happened if Don were still here.” He

winced. “And I wasn’t, I guess, but you can wish in one hand…”

“So,” Luth wondered, “Now that Pevy and Leo are gone, will that stop the gun and drug business?”

“Altogether? Oh hell no, rookie. It’ll just go back to small-time. The dealers will take it into their own hands, try to stake territories, build their own duster houses, gangs, guns, police raids, street wars, anarchy, all that fun stuff. Or Armond’ll take it all over, hell if I know.”

“Oh. At least we stopped them from using the company, sir,” Luth tried to look for a bright side.

“I know, but I’m still worried about the Jewels, and…”

“Althier?” Luth said what he couldn’t.

“…Yeah.”

Their conversation lulled as the band fired up a verse of, “Billy Shot My Stepmom.” Luth shared his jellybeans with his sulking boss until the Genome sat up and said in a fit, “Geez, when’re we gonna get some drin—” His eye caught a figure at the other end of the bar, and he swallowed his words. “Oh, Tami’s working tonight.”

“Who?” Luth looked that way, spotting a woman behind the counter. She was tall, lean, freckled of skin and plain of dress, wearing an ordinary tank top and cargo pants. Her chestnut hair was pulled into a floppy ponytail, and a glittering pony tattoo splashed across her left arm. Her attentions were presently on a group of men stacking beer bottles into a pyramid.

“Tami, the head waitress. She’s the best-booze and boobs all in one package. And I like my drinks like I like my women: hard and to the point.”

“That barely makes sense, sir. Do you know *everyone*?” Luth asked sourly, though he didn’t know why that vexed him-he should be used to Boss’s plethora of lady friends.

“Oh no, rookie,” Boss said matter-of-factly, “Everyone knows Tami. You’ll see what I mean.” He then plucked another jellybean from the pile, eliciting a yelp.

“Hey!”

“What?”

“That was the last red one. I was saving that.”

Boss paused, the bean already half-chewed in his mouth, and after a long gawk at his partner he

uttered bemusedly, "…Do you want it back?"

"You two are adorable," came a clipped voice directly ahead, startling Luth. Tami was leaning over her side of the bar, regarding him and Boss with a smug grin. "Can I get you lover boys something to drink?"

Boss put up a lukewarm smile. "Hey babe."

"Hey, Ultima." She picked up a discarded mug and began to wipe it out with a rag. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Yeah, been havin' a bit of a rough time lately."

Tami sniffed. "Psh, guy like you? Please."

Boss raised some casual indignation. "Hey, I'm allowed to have problems too, okay? Shit happens."

"Oh honey, tell me about it. My ex is hidin' out in Alexandria. Still won't pay a penny of child support. Fuckin' deadbeat."

"You know, Tami, if you need some help, I—"

"Keep your stupid money, I don't need it," Tami cut him short. 'I've been supporting an eighteen-month-old all by myself just fine.' She tossed a black look across the bar and started to rant, each

word elevating towards a shriek, “All I need is one real man in this whole damn country to step up and take some motherfucking responsibility! *Is that so much to ask*?”

The music hesitated and all the patrons shrank from the counter a notch, until Tami turned back to Boss and placidly continued, “If you really want to help me, you can give my deadbeat brother a job.”

“Oh? I didn’t know you have a brother.”

“I never told you about Drew? He’s the one who was going out with Mandy, until she went all crazy-cult and left the club. I hear she’s a *licensed witch* now. How the hell do people get licenses for that, is wha’ I wanna know.”

“Ohhh, he was Mandy’s boyfriend? I didn’t know that was your brother. So what’s he do now? Besides deadbeating.”

“He just moved back in last night. Had some big-name security job in Lindblum, hell if I know. He never talks about his work. I bet he was blowing Regent Mick for tips. Anyway, he shows up at the asscrack of the moon o’clock with his head wrapped up like some POW, saying some shmuck blew his eye out!”

Boss bit his lip and stared evasively at the counter. "…You don't say." Luth didn't get it, and didn't want to.

"His damn eye is fine-the doctor said the swelling'll go down in a few days. But Christ, now my mother has to baby-sit Liaf *and* his whiny ass while I'm at work? She'll find a way to blame me for this, I know it. Family sucks." Tami fixed a look on Luth, making the Burmecian immediately uncomfortable. "Who's your friend?"

"This is my partner, Lu."

"Hello, Miss Tami…" Luth responded timorously.

Tami beamed in high amusement. "Holy shit, aren't you a gentleman? You can just call me Tami, hon." She then resumed talking to Boss over Luth's head. "He looks like a regular sweetie-pie. I hope you're not getting him into trouble."

"Only the best," Boss assured. Luth coughed.

A rowdy voice shot across the bar, "Hey! How 'bout some service?"

Tami whirled on him and the blonde in his lap like a Black Mage flinging a fireball. "Hey! How

about you quit giving that hoochy-mamma a ride on her tab and go home to your *wife*, you goddamn worthless scab?"

Thus shut up, she switched back to Luth, offering a friendly hand. "It's very nice to meet you, Lu. So, what'll you two be having?"

"Um, Ipsen Scotch," Luth ordered off the cuff, before he tried the barkeep's patience.

Boss was dumbstruck. "Ipsen Scotch? *You*?"

"The man can order for himself, can't you, hon?" Tami spoke up. "And your poison, monkey-boy?"

Boss shrugged, confounded. "Hell, same."

She winked at Luth and strolled off to get it. Boss studied him with incredulous respect that quickly broke into laughter.

Luth pouted. "What?"

"Hahaha, I'm sorry, but I can't picture you with a hard drink, *ever*. Hahahaha."

Before Luth could muster a defense Tami returned, setting down a murky bottle and two glasses. Cornered into proving himself, Luth

promptly poured a shot, quaffed it and met Boss with a straight face, wagging his brow triumphantly.

Boss was pleasantly surprised. “Huh, you were serious! You are somethin’ else, Lu.”

“‘Everyone’s full of surprises,’ my mother always says.”

“Yeah, I shoulda figured. You Crescents all have iron stomachs. Even your grandmother could knock back some serious *firewater*.”

“So,” Tami interjected, “What’s the matter? You fellas look like you just buried somebody.”

“In a sense,” Boss quipped as he poured his own drink.

“Family trouble,” Luth volunteered, to Boss’s chagrin. The Genome flashed him an annoyed glower that quickly dissolved in his scotch.

Tami shook her head glumly. “The worst kind.”

Luth glimpsed the shiny pony again and blurted out some polite flattery, fighting not to acknowledge Boss and his bad temper. “I like your tattoo, Miss Tami.”

She lit up like a moogle with a kupo nut, clutching her arm affectionately. “Oh I *know*, I love it. It’s *sparkly*.”

“It’s a rub-on,” Boss flatly belittled it.

“It *still counts*, shut up.” Tami’s focus bounced off the bar and onto Luth’s wrist, which she snatched up and scrutinized with hyper enthusiasm. “Ohmygawd your fur is *blonde*. I want. Can I have it?”

Boss nudged his companion. “Heh, you can take the whole package.”

Luth’s hair bristled in recoil. “Sir!”

“What? Tami’s a nice girl. She only has two outstanding warrants now.”

“*Haha*,” Tami cawed, not daunted. ‘Don’t listen to a word he says,’ she advised Luth. “He’s a regular bastard.”

“You still love me,” Boss played.

“Yeah, like a pipe cleaner up my urethra. Oh oh oh!” She fished into her pocket and withdrew a pulsing, blue, plastic… thing. It split open to reveal a glowing dial pad and message screen. “Hang on,

let me get in a picture with you. Drew gave me this camera phone for my birthday and I'm *lovin'* it."

Armed with the phone's lens in her outstretched hand, she shuffled onto the bar and nestled up to Boss for a snapshot. He tried to shrug out of it, suddenly uneasy. "Ah, Tami, I don't really—"

"Oh shut up, I know you don't like getting pictures, but humor me." She reached over and tugged Luth's sleeve. "You too, cutie."

"Me? I'm—" Before Luth could properly object he was yanked into the line of fire and caught in the flash. Tami giggled and bounced back over the counter. "Thanks, dolls. It's going in my collection."

Luth blinked out of the shock quickly enough to comment, "I didn't know you were camera-shy, sir."

Boss looked ruffled. "I'm not *shy*, I just don't like *evidence*."

Tami's attention wandered up to the TV, which began narrating, "Class was dismissed early for hundreds of schoolchildren in Lindblum today…"

"Ugh, bombing a school," she huffed, disgusted. "What kind of sick fuck would do something like that?"

Boss hid behind his drink and remarked passively, “Takes all kinds.”

“I’d like ta find ’im and rip his balls off with a rusty pipe wrench,” she declared viciously, and Luth squeaked loudly at her violent gesticulations.

Boss passed the Burmecian another warning glare, just as a distant customer complained, “Hey, where’s my drink, bitch?” to the cackles of his companions.

Tami’s expression hardened. Without a second thought, she picked up the scotch and Lu’s empty shot, took a thick draught from the bottle and fired the glass at the offender’s head. It shattered on the bar just short of its target, sending the surrounding patrons ducking and cursing to the floor.

Boss was enthralled by the woman’s machismo. “God you’re beautiful. Marry me?”

“Sorry, I’ve already got a little boy,” she snipped, and then shrugged towards the throng of customers. ‘Looks like I should get back to serving these apes.’ She replaced Luth’s glass and left them the bottle, strutting away. “You boys play nice.”

“…A pleasure,” Luth said feebly in her wake.

“Quit acting so guilty, Lu,” Boss upbraided him once Tami was out of earshot. “It’s suspicious as hell.”

Luth cast another stricken look at the outraged parents on screen and groaned miserably. “I’m an accomplice.”

“Oh, no you’re not,” Boss blew off his concern. Luth returned a baleful stare, and Boss relented, “Well, okay, but they’ll never catch us, honestly. They won’t even waste their time on a hoax, so lighten up. You look like I made you eat a baby.”

Luth brooded on his fugitive status while Boss poured them both another round. “Besides, you didn’t know what I was doing until I already did it. That makes you an accessory, not an accomplice.”

“That doesn’t really help, sir,” Luth said bitterly, washing the words down with more scotch.

—13—

They passed the next couple of hours in restless peace, watching the stage and television in turns. Luth eventually grew comfortable in his companion’s silence, with doubtless thanks to the liquor blurring the fringes of his senses.

He was blearily enjoying a sitcom when Luth finally noticed how one-sided their silence really was-Boss had been rambling on-and-off for the past six commercial breaks.

“Heheh, you know what he’s gonna say because he’s been doing that gag the whole episode, but he’s gonna say somethin’ different now.”

“Quit spoilin’ it all, sir-*v-vaguely* spoiling it, I might add. I haben’t seen this before.”

“Neither have I. It’s just damn obvious. Vaguely.”

“I like you betta when you’re soba, sir.”

“When I’m sober or you’re sober?”

Luth’s right whiskers twitched as he gagged on a hiccup. “…Both.”

Boss rested his jaw in his hand and grumbled, “Back at’chya, Lu.” He closed his eyes and snorted under his breath. “Sheesh. *Family trouble*.”

“Wha’?”

“What you told Tami. Like *you* would know?” he pithily attacked him.

“Oh, I dunno, sir,” Luth slurred, barely knowing what Boss was talking about, much less the source of his bad humor. He tried to piece together some apologetic anecdote, but ended up saying out of the inebriated blue, “I ’ate my father.”

Boss wrinkled his nose. “Ate him? Geebus. I didn’t know you Burmecians were into that shit.”

Luth cracked up at the ludicrous imagery. “No! Ah, hahaha. H-hate him. He-he called me a nancy mamma’s boy. Said I would neva make a man’a myself. I was, was too soft, y’know? He said. But I don’t cry, sir, no I don’t. I never cried, not one tear, not even when Gramma died. I was, I wuza…” He hiccupped again. “…I’m a soldier.”

Boss tipped his eyebrows, his countenance softening. “Rookie, your sudden candor under the influence both intrigues and disturbs me. You know, a lot of people have problems with poor self-image. I think your problem is that you have *no* self-image. And, believe it or not, I know what will cure your problem.” He pinned a finger on Luth’s shoulder, driving in the point, “*You need to get laid*.”

He bashfully leaned away. “I s’ink you need t’shud up… sir.”

“Fine,” Boss patronized him, “Don’t listen to me and my centuries of worldly experience.”

“You canna even say that ’til youf been alive at lea’s two.”

“And I see alcohol also inhibits your ability to do math.”

“Nooo,” Luth blindly strove to correct the numbers. “You said one-hundred and ninety…” The solution clicked behind his eyes, and he trailed off in defeat. “…Oh. That’s not fair.”

“Yeah, you’ve completely stopped making sense.” Boss pushed Luth’s glass aside. “No more drinks for you.”

Luth sat up on his stool, gripping the edge of the bar for balance. “Listen, sir, I… umn… a secret, sir, something I haven’t told you… about my pilgrimage.”

Boss waved him down. “Com’on, Lu, don’t get all blathery on me. You don’t have to tell me anything.”

“No!” Luth insisted, just a little too loud. ‘I, I wanna tell you. You were right, init… itiff… insh… at first.’ He swallowed a clear breath. “We dun do

that anymore-I mean, Dragon Knights don't. That tradition died a long time ago. I mean, in a sense, I am on, erm, pilgrimage, just…" He wrung his thumbs, his voice weakening with his confession. "I'm the only one who knows about it. As far as my superiors-and my parents… as far as they know… I ran away."

Luth expected him to weigh in with some outlandish opinion or reproach, yet Boss respectfully reserved it. "Oh?"

He nodded shamefully, awaiting his condemnation.

Boss merely shrugged. "Well shit, Lu. You could've just said that from the start."

"You're… not angry that I lied to you?" Luth couldn't help recalling his own outburst on the way to Don's party, when the situation was reversed.

"What? Angry? Why?" He sputtered. "Am I confused? Yes. Angry? Geez, of course not. You did what you thought you had to do-I just don't get why you felt like you had to run away in the first place."

Luth was muddled and relieved at once. "It's just, my parents-they wouldn't have understood the way I felt, about the Dragon Knight training. I wasn't even

sure what I wanted to do, but if I tried to explain that to them, they… they would've been mad."

"Geez, so? What were they gonna do? Tell you to *go to your room*? Tami said it: you're a grown man. You can make your own decisions."

Luth sighed. "I know, sir, it just doesn't *feel* that way with them."

"Ah. Well." Boss rolled his brow, fishing for a sympathetic response. "I don't really know your folks, so I can't say. But you know the saying: you can't pick your parents."

"I'll say, sir," Luth grumbled, and he contemplated the backs of his hands for a spell.

The comedy show had a sentimental moment which eventually segued to flowery intercourse-literally, there were rose petals.

"Hrm, so romantic…" Luth mumbled dreamily.

Boss chuckled thickly. "Heh. You sound like a girl. Sex is never romantic, Lu."

Luth blinked groggily. "Never?"

"Pretty much ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine-nine-infinity-percent-times, yep."

“But what if it’s with someone you deeply care about?”

“Ninety-eight percent.”

“When did you become completely jaded to everything in the world?”

“I think it was around the time they took *The Crabbits* off the air.”

“Honestly, sir…”

“Look, you can be cuddly and intimate and romantic all you want-right up until the little soldier is deployed. Then it’s just ridiculous, any way you look at it. Sex is a riot, Lu. If I weren’t so busy gettin’ off I’d be laughing through the whole thing.”

“That’s disturbing, sir.”

An unfamiliar face broke into the fold, surprising them both from behind. She was made of pert blonde curls, marble eyes and a button nose, and her kiss on Boss’s cheek was sweet and dainty.

“Hey, long time no see! Remember me, sugar?” she chirped.

Boss floundered, half-interested, “Ahm, sure… Gloria?”

“Nope! But guess what?” She grinned wickedly through the indignity, her riposte a salty slap across the other cheek. “You’re a shallow, sexist, crass, lecherous, absolutely spoilt bastard.” She then huffed and left on the whim she appeared on.

Indolently impressed, Boss massaged his sore face and remarked to her retreating backside, “Wow, *lecherous*. There’s a classy word you don’t hear anymore. You’ve got my number, babe.”

Luth blinked. “Who was that?”

“Beats me. She looked hot, though.” He toasted himself. “Good for me.”

Boss received an unsavory frown as Luth pried, “This is probably out of line, but I’m going to ask out of morbid curiosity: how many women *have* you slept with, sir?”

He blithely replied, “Nobody, since last night. What do you mean, last week? This year?”

“I kind of meant *ever*.”

He scratched his head, looking boggled. “Damn, I’m not a computer. I can’t crunch those kinda numbers.”

Luth scoffed. “Oh, honestly.”

“Honestly? I can estimate, if you really want to know. Go on, guess. I’ll tell you if you’re close.”

“Hmm…” Luth tested his game. “Umm… thirty?”

Boss’s cool front didn’t last three seconds before crumbling into snickers. “Hah, hahaha.”

“Too low?”

“Hahahahahah, oh sweet mist, keep going, seriously.”

“Fifty?”

“Hahahaha! Man, you’re killin’ me. *Higher*.”

“More than a hundred?”

“Aha, ha, ha.” He had to stop for his breath while he smudged out a tear. “Phew. Wow. You’re still way too low. Keep guessing.”

“No, I think I’m going to stop now,” Luth said tartly, not wanting to play anymore.

“Hehehe.” Boss threw up his hands in surrender. “What can I say, Lu? The ladies love me.”

“I think it’s just the other way around, sir,” Luth cut him down, frowning as Boss reached for the last

jellybean. "…You know," he said quietly, once it was gone and the Genome's ear was open, "I can't imagine what it's like to live as long as you have."

Boss was struck sober by the remark. He mulled over it just a minute before stating bluffly, "Really freaking boring. You know there are people out there who can live for over a thousand years? I don't know how they do it. I've only done a fraction of the time and I'm ready to blow my brains out."

Luth's optimism was tireless, even after six shots. "Surely life isn't all that dull, sir."

"I dunno…" Boss turned a speculative glance onto a stripper across the room, watching as she straddled a stuffed steer's head. 'It has its perks.' He shrugged. "You get used to it, I guess. Or kill yourself. A lot. It's probably a lot easier for them when all their friends and relatives can hit triple-digit birthdays, too."

"Exactly what kinds of people are you talking about, sir? There's nobody that old on Gaia…"

"Oh, they're way out there. Not on this world."

Luth decided to pass on the interplanetary question-the answer was probably too many hard drugs. "You still have friends here, sir."

Boss smiled wearily and skimmed a finger along the fine grain of Luth's ear, sending a tiny shiver down his tail. "You're cute, always trying to cheer me up. Don't ever change, Lu."

"Um… thanks?" Luth squirmed a little, trying to throw the conversation off him. "You know, sir, you've been alive for two centuries, but only married twice."

"I smell a personal question."

"Pardon me if this is insensitive, but have you considered marrying again? You might be less lonely with another companion."

Boss leered at him. "Are you proposing, Lu?"

Luth choked on thin air, and the Genome brushed it off. "Nah, Lu, no. It's not that simple. I can't go through all that again."

"Was it that bad?" Luth asked sincerely.

"Eh?" Something livid flickered in his eyes, like a cringing candle. "No, no, it wasn't bad, not like that. It was great. Best days of my life. It's just the end that got me. I can't… no. No. Really, after my second wife died, I got out of that business."

Luth's brow creased, perplexed. "You think marriage is a business?"

"Obviously you haven't been married yet," Boss said drolly, and went back to his drink.

"Uh… huh." Luth started digging for a safer subject. "Say, sir, didn't you promise to tell me about Lady Freya?"

Boss rolled up his gaze and thumbed his chin, considering her. "I didn't sleep with her, no. Hmm, I should've-I bet she was a wild fang in the sack. All those prim-and-proper types always turn into beasts in bed."

Luth snapped back with more than mild disgust, "That's not what I meant."

"Haha, I know. Let's cut to the chase, Lu. You don't want to hear about 'Her Honorable Lady Freya' and war heroes and your lineage and all that stuck-up crap; you want me to tell you what she was *really* like."

"Well, I…" Luth failed to deny it.

"I'll tell you! But I'm gonna need a lot more to drink." He downed another glass and shuddered vigorously. "Woo. That's the stuff. Now, Freya…"

He leveled a finger at Luth. “I’ll be straight with ya. She was hot. I really wasn’t into Burmecians at the time, but if I was, I woulda hit that. Soft hair, nice thighs, a decent rack, tall-I can dig taller women…”

“Sir!” Luth squawked.

“What? A man can’t call it like it is? Well, was. I guess she was too old for me-when we first met, anyway.”

“That’s not what I meant *at all*, sir,” he reiterated.

“Hahaha. Ah, Lu. I love fuckin’ wid’ja.”

Luth’s ears burned, not appreciating the gag, and he moved on. “You were good friends, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, we were pretty close.”

“So, what was she like? Seriously.”

“Oh man. She was a perfect gentlewoman-totally insufferable.”

“Oh really?” A proud, humored smile crawled up Luth’s face.

“Hell, that’s what she said about me, too-the insufferable part, that is. I was never a gentleman-or

woman, for that matter."

"I am not surprised, sir," Luth flatly nipped him.

"Thanks, rookie," Boss took it in stride. "But she… She was such a strong lady. She was tough, and noble, and well-spoken-I swear, every word she said sounded like poetry. She was fantastic on the battlefield, swift and light like a… like a bird. She was a good mother; I loved her kids. She was just… amazing. And beautiful."

There was a sticky, longing silence, Luth humbled by the eulogy and Boss lost in nostalgia. The moment was broken when Boss added abruptly, "And she hated cabbage."

Luth snorted, unable to repress a grin.

"And she was awful in the mornings until you shoved some tea down her throat-just straight-up, scalding hot, no cream or sugar or anything pussy like that. And also, she would rise from the grave to find a way to kill me if she heard me tell you this, but she made the best surly drunk ever. Just bad, bad, hilariously angry. She'd swear like a dwarf. I crossed her at a bar once and she all but kicked my ass. It was great."

"Hehe."

He sighed. “And no matter how old I got, she always called me a kid.”

“Hmm,” Luth hummed appreciatively. “You know, you’re not what I expected, for the King of Thieves.”

Boss gave him a charmed, quizzical smirk. “Really? What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someone…” Luth fumbled with the words he wanted, just out of reach. “Ah, um… taller?”

“Ohhh!” He slapped the counter excitably. “Is that a burn? I’ll remember that.”

“Er, sorry sir, I didn’t mean it like that. Um…” Luth clicked his long fingernails against the countertop, itching for an escape. “So, what about Griffin? How did you find out he was a Coral? Did he volunteer it?”

“Hell no. Griffin wouldn’t volunteer shit from his own asshole. I met him in The Pen, just like you first saw ‘im. I kicked his ass then too, of course, and afterwards I stopped to ask him-cuz he looked familiar, y’know? I said, ’Hey, are you a Coral?’ and he looked at me like I’d just finished fucking his sister-I mean, shit, maybe I have, I dunno, but that’s

not the point. He was like, ‘How did you know?” and I said, ’Lucky guess.’ He’s been pickin’ fights with me ever since.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. He’s a weird guy.…Griffin should grow a goatee. I think it would suit him, don’t you?”

“I… can’t say I’ve thought about that, sir.” Luth was relieved of that imagery when they heard Tami bellow across the bar, “*Cocksuckers*!”

“She seems angry,” Luth noted cautiously, grateful that he wasn’t on her warpath.

“She’s just warming up. Anyway, what else would you like to know?”

Luth perked up, eager to take advantage of this opportunity. “Oh, tell me some stories from the Mist War.”

Boss grimaced. “Stories? What’re you, nine years old? Geez, Lu, you don’t want to hear about that.”

“But I do, sir.”

“It was war!” he exclaimed, exasperated. “There were explosions, and fighting, and death. Lots and

lots of death. You should shut up and thank your dragon gods you weren't there."

"Aww sir, I can't even ask what the Mist was like?"

"Mist? It was just this big fog… thing. You know about it."

"I know, sir, but I was just wondering what it was like to actually see it. Did it look funny? Or smell?"

"Smell?" He shrugged in remembrance. "I guess it did smell weird. You know the way the air smells before a storm? Kinda, I dunno, coppery? It was like that. That and… ashes."

"Ashes?"

"Yeah. I guess it was something between fog and smoke."

"I think they call that smog, sir."

"Haha. Well, you know what I mean. Or I guess you don't. But you know what the Mist really was, don't you? I don't have to explain that."

"Oh, I know. I'm grateful there isn't any Mist anymore, but I can't help being curious."

“Why? This stuff can’t be that interesting.”

“Oh, but it is. I love history.”

“Really? I don’t,” Boss said moodily.

Luth frowned, disappointed. “I’m sorry to hear that, sir.”

There was a slow, calculating pause, and then Boss turned up a sly look. “I can show you what it looked like, if you want.”

—13—

“Sir, where are we going?” Luth asked for the third time.

The blue moon was full tilt over their heads as they crossed the river via a covered catwalk.

“I told you, it’s a surprise.”

Instead of taking the pedestrian route, however, they crept along the bridge’s outer shell, their feet taking purchase on steel girders and jutting bricks.

Luth inched across a corner, stepping off the catwalk’s steep canopy and onto a dark windowsill. “We’re not doing anything… erm… not…?”

Boss was two steps ahead, pulling himself up and over a gutter. “Relax, Lu, you won’t get into trouble. Now shh.”

“If it’s so safe,” Luth grumbled as he porpoised onto the roof after him, “Why are we sneaking around and whispering?”

“*Because*, surprise. Just shut up and trust me.”

Luth groaned and followed regardless. He was glad for his childhood’s intrepid jaunts across Burmecia’s hoods and steeples; he’d never be afraid of heights or soggy shingles, and he had a head for navigating rafters that came in handy now that he had to keep up with Boss, who wasn’t hesitating at a single one. Really, for all the listing, pipe-meshed, colliding platforms and balconies, Old Treno really wasn’t that different from his old neighborhood, now that Luth looked on its topside.

They took the high route over three streets and finally paused where a fork off the river pooled around a regal, limestone facade. A pair of granite griffins stood watch over the front gate, one pale spotlight dragging their pockmarked shadows into the recessed threshold. Boss perched on his toes atop a collapsed parapet, sizing up the entrance from a safe block away.

“What is this place?” Luth wondered as he shuffled to sit beside him. He accidentally knocked a broken stone down the wall, and watched it shatter on the cobbles after a queasy drop.

“Shh,” Boss checked him again. ‘It’s the King place,’ he explained quietly. “Well, the backside of it. Right there’s the old famous auction house, though they shut if off and moved it a long time ago. Now they just use that part of the mansion to store treasure and hot shiz.”

“Hot shiz?” Luth was baffled.

“Oh yeah, the real priceless shit. There’s stuff in there that makes my vault look like a stamp collection. Actually, whenever I’m out to restock, I look here first.”

“What do you mean, ‘restock’?” Luth asked with dawning suspicion. “We’re not going to try and sneak in there, are we, sir?”

“Oh no,” Boss breezily shot the notion down. ‘Not through the door; that’s crazy.’ He tossed a nod around the derelict watchtower and down the brick wall that snaked into the courtyard. “We’re going in from the top, so we don’t set off the alarms.” That said, he bounded down the crumbling steps and

began slinking through the antiquated debris like a lion across the savanna.

“Sir!” Luth scrambled in pursuit, clumsily snaring him by the fuzz of his tail. Boss stumbled onto his face, wrenched about and took himself back. ‘What?’ he hissed impatiently, smoothing the fur back in place. “Lu, I love ya, but you’re driving me nuts.”

“Driving *you* nuts?” Luth countered, confounded. “We can’t go in there! This is breaking and entering! This is a crime!”

“Possession is nine tenths of the law, rookie. I’m doing a little property reclamation.”

“That’s just what you’re calling *stealing*!”

Boss’s retort was sardonically pleasant, imitating one of his phone operators. “Thank you for calling, Lu. We highly value your input and in the future will *need you to shut up so we can get past security*.” He pointed emphatically into the courtyard just beyond the saw-toothed ledge, where a brown suit and badge was stalking the well-kempt lawn.

Luth gasped and dropped to his knees, taking cover behind the bricks. He covered his eyes and whimpered, “We should turn back now, sir…”

Boss pried one hand off Luth's face, grabbing his attention. "Hey, hey! Get with the program, here. You know what these jerkoffs used to do? They bought treasure and expensive shit from cat burglars and thugs, then auctioned them off to rich idiots who didn't realize they were buying their own crap back. And I bet you two pennies to the buck they're *still* doing that to this day. I'm just cutting to the chase."

"You think the Kings might have something that was stolen from you?" Luth ventured.

"Well," Boss flaked, "It doesn't hurt to make sure, does it? Anyway, that's only half the reason we're here."

"What's the other reason?"

Luth should've known better than to ask. "Because, *surprise*, damnit."

"Um, but," Luth wouldn't give up, "Why don't you file a report with the police or try to reason with the owner instead of this insane vigilantism?"

"*Please*. The King family is a bunch of cutthroat old puckerasses. What do you want me to do, waltz in there and say, 'Hey man, you stole my stuff. May I have it back, pretty please?' You're outta your mind, Lu. And what did I tell you about cops?

Besides, you're in Treno. The long arm of the law is too busy beating off the sheriff." He sat up on his haunches and resumed prowling. "Now, we gotta be quiet once we get in."

Luth cried as Boss pulled away, "But, this is crazy! We can't do this!"

"Why the hell not?"

"Because, karma, sir! Haven't you ever heard the saying, 'Two wrongs do not make a right'?"

Boss stopped, sighed, went back to Luth for the last time and vigorously shook him. "Lu-Lu! Are you listening to yourself?"

"I-I can't think because you're shaking me!" Luth dumbly rattled-he could virtually hear the alcohol sloshing in his skull.

"*I am going to shake you until candy falls out.* We're climbing the roof of the King mansion in the middle of the night in the most heavily guarded part of the biggest crime pit in the world and *you're debating the ethics of breaking-and-entering with the King of Thieves*. Have you ever heard the saying, 'Shit or get off the pot'? Because if you're going to piss and moan like this the whole way I'm leaving you outside."

Luth was jarred stiff. “No, sir, I won’t! I mean, I’m not! I’m with you. I just wish you wouldn’t do this.”

Boss winked and let go. “Relax, kid, you won’t get in trouble. You’re with me, right? You have no idea how many times I’ve had to do this.”

His constitution set, Luth crawled in Boss’s footsteps, along the shambles of the outer wall and into the smoother corners of the estate. There was a quaint gumdrop path winding across the boxed-in lawn, its ornamental lights the only beacons for the solitary guard to follow. While he was busy skipping every other stone and humming in a trance, Boss slid up a drain pipe, across a porch, down the privacy fence and behind some prickly hedges, keeping along the fringes of every shadow.

Within a moment they reached a tool shed. Boss marked their targets with wide gestures as he dictated, “There’s a breaker box in here. We’re going to flip it so the lights go out-the alarm, too. While the guard is back here figuring out how to switch it all back on without waking everyone in the house, we’re going to sneak in the gallery through the back door over there.”

“If you say so, sir.” Luth wasn’t going to test him anymore.

“I sure do. Now, the only trick about this shed…” He nudged the doorknob, which wouldn’t yield. ‘Is that it’s… “He growled softly, his thick fingers clawing the rift between the door and its frame.”… locked like… “One last, hard shove, to no avail.”…a retard. There’s the lock on the knob here, and then a padlock on the inside, and I can see the key in it.’ He scratched his nose. “Hmm… waitasec.”

Luth watched in bemusement as Boss pressed his back to the shed, threaded his tail through the crack and blindly guided it along on the obscured side of the door. “Ah… ah… com’on… it’s right-and…” Luth heard a muffled jingle and then one flat *pat*, like striking dirt. “Aw, crap.”

“Did you drop it, sir?”

“Yeah, the whole thing fell. What a tardlock. But I need a better grip on it! The lock won’t hold still so I can pull the key out.”

“Can’t you just pull the whole thing out?”

“It’s too big. If only I had another…” A twinkle lit his shifty grin. “You have a tail, too.”

“I… what?” Luth defensively seized his own and flicked his nose at the rickety shed. “I’m not sticking it in there!”

“Nothing’s going to bite you. Just get your butt over here, before the rent-a-cop comes back this way.”

“Um…” Luth timidly complied, sitting next to Boss and working his skinny tail through the break beneath the door. Together they fished for the lock and key, lost in a heap somewhere in the dark.

“This is weird, sir…” he had to comment.

“Yeah, well…” Boss shrugged, unable to finish the thought. “Oh! I got it. Do you got it?”

“I think so.”

“Just hold it tight.”

“Okay…?”

A metallic rustle indicated success. Boss swept the key out from under the door, tossed it into his hands and picked the shed open. The rest was too automatic, like striding across the shipyards to tag another box, or down to the foyer to talk to Sheryl- like another routine shift, another day on the clock. Boss found the breaker box and mussed the switches

up. Then there was a blacker night and mild cursing, and Boss did everything he said he would, and the guard did everything Boss said he would, and Luth followed along like he said he would-the key even opened the back gallery door without a hitch. Luth would have stopped to feel his heart racing two beats ahead of the danger, but there wasn't even a second afforded for that.

And then he was standing in the gallery, and it was dark and quiet, and any noise Luth wanted to make from the pit of his heart was silenced with a simple glance and Boss's finger to his lips.

They padded across a polished hardwood floor, the expansive, delicate windows pouring rays of midnight over their toes and the plush carpet-runner. Boss took him up a slow, wide, spiral staircase and onto a crossroads to the upper levels. Luth panned a curious look around the chamber, which was swathed in breath-still ivory lace and decorated in patches with lush ferns in expensive vases. The vaulted ceiling sheltered a mural too intricate for nocturnal eyes, and straight ahead was a wall likewise hibernating.

Boss stood behind him, his hands light and persuasive on Luth's shoulders. "Right here."

Luth's brow rumpled. "What's here?" he asked carefully. "There's nothing but a wall. It's too dark to see."

"Just wait a minute."

He shed about a pound of fur on the spot when the electricity clacked on, all the gallery's subtle night-lights buzzing to life like fireflies. Boss chuckled faintly as he held Luth steady in place, directing his frantic glances to the yet-ignored wall. "Look, look."

"Oh geez that sca…" Luth looked, and beheld the largest painting he'd ever seen, several feet in breadth and nearly stretching from baseboards to rafters. Three dim, gilded portrait lights splashed over it just right, setting fire to the warm colors and watering the cool ones, like a field of wildflowers pressed to canvas. It depicted a grand, ancient landscape, a waterfall streaming off a cliff into peaked, smoky woods, and a sunrise so lifelike Luth wanted to shield his eyes.

The bronze nameplate read, "The Evil Forest, 1802," and Luth recognized the piece with an astonished breath. "That's an original *Michael*, isn't it? It's part of his famous Mist series."

“You know your art history.”

“I did study a bit… Wow. It’s so much more amazing in person than it is in a book.” Luth was enraptured by the artwork, staring at the majestic scene as if it were just over the side of an airship, real and impossible to comprehend. *‘Mist… How could someone make something so terrible look so beautiful?’*

Boss was suddenly far off, his interest captured by something else. Luth snapped out of his reverie and approached him. “What are you looking at, sir?”

The Genome was parked over a marble stand and its velvet-nested package. Boss smoothly took the lid off the crystal box and withdrew a palm-sized orb that held all the hues of a black light. “Check it out, rookie. It’s Dark Matter.”

Luth had never heard of such a thing-it just looked and smelled like the most sinister… *nothing*. “Dark Matter? What’s it do?”

The stone’s lurid gleam reflected strangely in Boss’s reverent gaze. “Oh, it’s somethin’….This’ll do.”

“Huh?” Luth couldn’t question him, especially once the door downstairs shuddered, heralding the

night watch. Boss briskly pocketed the treasure while Luth spun around sharply-too sharply, apparently, because in the next second Boss was writhing on the floor and holding his groin. Luth was washed with horror and fright when he realized he'd accidentally struck his boss.

"Fu-Geez!" the Genome frothed, his tail thrashing and his face as red as a moogle's nose. "I said I can't die, not that I'm immune to getting-kicked-in the-balls! What's wrong with you?"

There was some lackluster grumbling and footfalls directly below as the guard drew closer, and Luth knew enough to not waste time thinking. He instinctively scooped Boss up and carried him off, down the opposite hall.

"The hell—" Boss gracelessly accepted his 'rescue,' muttering, "This is comin' outta your next check."

The rug bunched up under his toes as Luth skidded to a halt in a dead-end of a drawing room. "Very sorry, sir," he said unsympathetically, his mind rather on their pertinent doom. "The guard is coming! What do we do?"

“Shit, I don’t…” Boss trailed off at the distant, telltale beeping of a keypad alarm being reset. “Shit! Uh, the window, quick!”

They scrambled for the glass portal, flipped the latch and wiggled outside in record time. Luth did not stall another second, leaping deftly off the flowerbox and onto the roof, which he crossed in three long, silent strides. Neither stopped until their feet were soundly on the wasted bricks of the abandoned watchtower, where they collapsed in a fit of panting and insane cackling.

“Hahaha!” Boss roared while Luth spun in circles, checking every corner like a dog with a spider on its tail. It took a minute for the Burmecian to settle down, his hands yet shaking. ‘I can’t believe we did that!’ He flopped onto his back and pressed a hand to his chest, struggling to quell his fluttering lungs and heart. “Oh gods, why did we do that?”

“Haha, wasn’t it awesome?”

“I can’t believe we *got away* with that!”

Boss leaned over him, one lithe arm crossing his shoulders. “Were you scared?”

“It was terrifying!”

He flashed an incubus-grin, his hair spilling around his shadowed face like a bleached mane. “Really?”

“Yes!” Luth exclaimed, frazzled beyond repair. “We could have been caught, we could have gone to *jail*, we could have been *killed*—”

“That makes me so hot.”

“My family would be disgraced-*What?*”

He said it low, deep, so simple, so easy, like he was asking him to just *breathe*. “Kiss me.”

“W-what?” Luth couldn’t even see straight, still dizzy from the chase that almost was.

“Kiss me, Lu. Kiss me like you’re crazy,” Boss rasped, dipping close so the words were hot on his neck, and Luth was racked with the warmest shiver ever.

“I…” his voice jammed up and he didn’t know what to feel, and Boss’s eyes glittered like Dark Matter and they were going to get *caught* but they didn’t and he knew it and loved it.

Becoming a Dragon Knight wasn’t supposed to be this complicated.

“Or are you afraid?” It was quiet, challenging, dangerous, just-just *Boss*.

Luth did it, because he was-crazy and scared and everything. Burmecians don’t even kiss like humans do; they can’t, but damned if either was about to use *that* as an excuse.

He tasted like cigarettes, licorice, scotch and bubblegum. His tongue tickled the long roof of Luth’s mouth and a giggle slipped out, on the brink of laughing and crying at once. It was way too messy and he slobbered over them both and they were doing it wrong, he was sure, but it was okay, they were always going to be okay because it was *him* and being okay was what he did for a living, whether he wanted to live or not.

Boss showed him how to do everything wrong.

So he kissed him, because he was crazy.

“Oh yeah,” Boss purred predatorily, and Luth about drowned in his heady breath. *You want this, too.*

He could feel Boss’s excitement through it all, brushing his thigh, tight and hard. His ears were pounding. His heart thrashed in his ribs. His hips bucked, fighting for flight, but Boss saddled him and

the rubbing and catching of cloth and belts and skin and hair made Luth's groin ache and his throat shaky with a moan. Boss held his muzzle shut with a reassuring, "Shh," and they were doing it wrong, crazy teeth sinking into his neck, thief-fingers unwinding his belt and a calloused palm taking him.

His fur tingled with every hot throb in his veins and his tail lashed against the bricks and he remembered to breathe with a hitched snort and they were doing it wrong, upside-down and backwards and tails around shoulders and ankles, the world spinning without him. Boss let go and crawled south and licked and sucked, bracing Luth's wide hips with one hand and touching himself with the other- and Luth hissed, wondering vacantly where it all went wrong.

"Sir… ah-a-a-ah-s-sir!"

"Hnn," Boss sloppily growled, "When are you going to stop calling me that?"

Afterwards, once Luth was spent and everything was tucked back in place, Boss sat up on one arm, wiped his chin and tittered, "Hehe, I can't believe you actually did it," as if it were a joke. Luth's face burned so hot he could've gone bald.

—13—

They found an inn, some backwater hovel under the docks, and Boss never asked for a favor returned-he never asked for anything.

“Did you think it was romantic?” was all he wanted to know, still laughing.

Luth was tired, sore and afflicted with Ipsen’s malaise, so he only had the mind to petulantly reply, “I am not gay.”

Boss threw up his hands, sincerely jesting, “Hey, then neither am I!”

He stopped calling him sir and went to sleep.

A/N: I can think of at least two people who are going to murder me in my sleep because of this chapter. I request that my tombstone reads, “*It had to be done*.”

Thanks for the support, everyone, and sorry for the wait. Long hours at work, World of Warcraft and having two wisdom teeth removed haven’t exactly been conductive to writing-though I’m dying to finish this fic. Next chapter’s going to be a

(comparatively) short filler-thing, so don’t expect it to take long.

On that note, see y’all next time in: Business as Usual.

14. Business as Usual

14. Business as Usual

Luth’s head was still swimming (and his cheeks smoldering) on the first airship back to Lindblum. The previous night’s… incident was just another wacky escapade as far as Boss paid it no mind, and so long as Luth didn’t bring it up either, it was ready to recede from their memories. “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” was a just another quibble Luth was raised on.

There was an uninteresting delay at South Gate Junction that killed the rest of their day, which they spent bunked together in a shipyard motel.

Luth was slouched up on a couple of pillows and browsing TV stations from one of the twin beds. Their room was a tidy, straightforward allowance with a slip of a window, barely enough room to walk, a few cigarette burns in the coarse, knotted carpet and yellowed, peeling floral wallpaper. On the nightstand next to him sat a telephone and a courtesy card with instructions for dialing out-of-town. A pang of homesickness struck, and he wanted to call his parents. He didn’t know where to begin, though.

“Hello Mother, how have you been? Yes, it’s been a few months. No, I haven’t done anything about finishing my Dragon Knight training. No, I don’t have Lady Freya’s diary. I’m afraid I lost it, I’m sorry. Yes ma’am, I’m doing fine. I’m working for a Genome now. He uses his company to traffic illegal drugs for the mob. The other mob bosses were out to kill us, but we killed them first. Last night I got drunk, broke into a rich family’s mansion and kissed another man. How’s Father?”

No, it wouldn’t work.

Luth sighed, changed the channel and tried to forget about the things he’d left behind. Boss abruptly announced that he was bored and jumped into the bathroom. Not wanting to consider the implications there, Luth opted for oblivious until Boss reappeared, approached the other bed haltingly and stumbled into it, looking dazed. Luth let him lie there and stare blankly at the ceiling for a commercial or two before enquiring, “You okay, sir?”

No response. Luth tried louder, “Sir?”

Still nothing. He didn’t honestly feel like getting up, but Luth grudged his laziness and moved to sit

by his roommate. “This isn’t funny, sir,” Luth chided as he waved his hand above Boss’s nose.

He didn’t even blink. A flash of genuine concern was replaced with a glower as Luth clicked his tongue in disgust. “You took something, didn’t you?”

Boss finally came around, his glassy, dilated eyes blinking in slow motion. “Mmm,” he simpered, “I think I overdosed again.”

“On *what*?” Luth didn’t bother waiting for the answer. He stepped into the bathroom and skimmed the garbage, though the only trace he found was a washed-out plastic zip-bag.

“Tomb dusters,” Boss supplied at length.

“Sir, no…” Luth’s arms fell to his sides, at a loss. He knew about tomb dusters (even if it was mostly propaganda), and they were called that on the street for a reason. “Where did you even get them?”

“Mrmn, you *do* realize we just left Treno, right? Is my *business*,” Boss said pointedly, his voice waterlogged. “Ohhh… I’m slipping. This is great.”

Luth groaned and parked on the edge of the bed, his muzzle sinking into his hands. It was too early to

deal with this; the six o'clock news wasn't even on yet. "You're not helping my headache, sir."

Behind him, Boss rolled onto his belly with one hissing, taut shudder. Luth steadied a hand on the nape of his neck, searching for a pulse. "Are you going to be okay?"

His tail flicked in a spasm, and Boss sniffed into the covers. "Psh. You know the answer to that."

"I'd like to hear it again."

"I'ma jus' fine. You don't hafta do anything. Go watch your show."

"You're cold, and shaking."

"No kiddin'."

"In case you can't tell, I'm very cross with you right now, sir."

"Oh? As a mattera fact, I couldn't. Are you going to nag me?"

"I should, but I don't know how. You're just impossible."

"Tha's the spirit."

Giving up, Luth went to the closet, took out a spare blanket, draped it over his enfeebled boss and resigned to recline next to him.

Boss talked for a while, though it was just delirious prattling. “When we ge’back, we’ve got a lottum work ta do.”

“Why’s that, sir?” Luth humored him, one eye trying to catch the end of *Ragtime’s Guessing Gauntlet*.

“You’m… I gotta show you how to… howta… mrn.”

“Hmm? Don’t worry about it right now, sir.”

Boss uneasily complied, fading into a silent spell. The grey clouds outside had turned black by the time he recovered enough to speak coherently. The Genome was then propped up on the room’s shortage of pillows and leaning on Luth’s side, foggily watching a late-nite movie.

“Y’know… I treat you like crap and you keep hanging around. You don’t have some kind of masochistic inferiority complex… thingy, do you?”

Luth bit his lip, failing to digest that possibility. “Um, no…”

“Then why do you put up with me?”

“Sometimes I wonder, sir,” he said wryly.

“This isn’t some kind of retarded hero worship, is it?”

“No, sir. I’m pretty sure not. It just feels like the right thing to do.”

“It’s pity, then?”

“No, I just… I don’t know, sir. You don’t need a reason to do the right thing, do you?”

Boss’s head lolled against the wall with a hollow thump. “I see the irony, and it hurts.”

“I think that’s just from hitting your head there. And we might be friends, is all, sir.”

Boss wiggled closer, threading his hand through the crook of Luth’s arm. “Noooo, I know what you are. You’re a bro.”

Luth scratched his nose, befuddled. “A… bro?”

“Yeah, a real bro.” He almost sat up straight, wobbling with the effort. “Hey, uh… do I make you nervous?” he asked, his voice throat-deep and roiling quiet, like a wolf.

“Uh…” Luth didn’t know how to answer—maybe that was a yes.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe…” He shifted a little, his composure crumbling. “Maybe you make me nervous, too?”

Luth was dumbfounded. The Burmecian was quite possibly the most unassuming person in the *world*—how could he put anyone, much less the impetuous Genome, out of ease? “What? *Me*? Why?”

“I don’t know,” Boss admitted, wetting his lips and squirming like a stuck grub. “But for some reason I really care about what you think of me.”

Luth swallowed dryly. “Don’t worry, you’re… not in your right mind now, sir. You should rest.”

“Heh…” He mumbled some garbled refute into Luth’s shoulder and drifted off to sleep, just like that.

Luth gave up his ill temper with a muddled sigh, gingerly reached over to turn out the light and attempted to watch the rest of the film—though he couldn’t. He couldn’t stop thinking about the way he couldn’t stay mad at Boss.

Boss wasn’t kidding about working. As soon as day broke, they ate a snappy breakfast, returned to central and hit the office, where Boss sat Luth down at the desk and began to instruct him on the more delicate company procedures, things usually delegated to Sheryl or, in rare cases, handled by Boss himself. There was a lot of writing, stamping and tabulating, and more often than not Luth’s left hand was hovering over a calculator.

“I want you to be ready to handle anything,” Boss explained. “There’s a lot to running this place, but it’s not that hard if you know what you’re doing. Just like any job, right?”

“If you say so, sir…” Luth dubiously agreed, and he poured over documents and ledgers until Boss grew bored for him and called it a day.

Luth spent the evening by himself, undergoing a different brand of training. It had been a while since he’d practiced his exercise routine, the one perfected in Burmecia Palace under his instructors. He took his old halberd to the roof and went through the motions, watching the late summer sun simmer into twilight and then drown in the city’s dusky nightglow.

He liked the roof. He discovered it while exploring the stairwell one odd day (he figured he could get some extra exercise running up and down the nine floors). The rubble-paved, cement-boxed open space was isolated and serene in the way only a high, breezy peak could be, and he was a little too self-conscious to work out in a gym around a bunch of other people. Besides, he liked to be alone with his thoughts sometimes.

He stayed up later than he expected, but he was satisfied with his loose, sore limbs as he hobbled down the stairs and back to his home floor. Luth was rounding the corner just past the elevator when he spotted a tangle of legs, arms and blonde hair, like a giant flaxen fly on the wall. It took a moment to recall the girl's name: Susan, the "therapist."

"I'm gonna eat you up like a jelly donut," Boss purred into her neck as one nimble hand unbuttoned her blouse and the other slipped down her waist, curling around the belt of her denim shorts. Susan dwarfed him by a foot—Luth remembered that he liked his women taller, and then he felt gross for even knowing that.

She threw her head back, cackling. "Hahaha! That is the *least erotic* thing I have ever heard."

“Shuddup, I’m not trying that hard.”

“Well, aren’t we touchy tonight? What’s the matter, little boss?”

“Mnh…” he mumbled into her bra, looking about to undo the front clasp with his *teeth*. “Just a little lonely.”

She stroked his hair, brushing a few strands behind an ear. “Mn-hmn? What’s a cute little gillionaire like yourself got any business being lonely?”

“Money and looks don’t buy happiness, babe.”

“Heh. I wish I knew what you meant.”

“I’ve got a pretty penny for you if you’ll keep me company tonight.” He threw her a reaching glance, eyes full of pouty need, like a puppy. If he was acting (and Luth had no doubt), it was a first-rate performance. Luth would never have the gall to speak to a woman like that—it was one way he and Boss would never see eye-to-eye.

“Heheh, you scamp.” Susan didn’t seem to mind.

Boss spared a second out of her bosom to pass Luth a wink and a wave. “You wanna play with us, Lu?” Susan, following his lead, giggled lewdly and

blew him a kiss. Luth, startled by the scene and then by being caught watching, blushed and rushed by the pair, retreating into his room.

He faintly heard Boss chortling after him. “He’s so cute, I love ’im.”

“Mmm, even more than me?” Susan tested him, voice dripping with suggestion.

“Nooot at the moment,” he judiciously replied, and Luth made a point not to hear any more as he went to bed.

The next workday was more of the same. Luth was perusing the fine print on some tax forms while Boss sat on the sofa, smoking a cigarette under a cracked window.

Luth flipped a page and remarked casually, “You should quit smoking, sir. It’s bad for your health.”

Boss gave him a hard, disbelieving look, and Luth remembered whom he was talking to. “Oh… right. Carry on, sir.”

“Ah, Lu.” Boss flicked the nub of his cigarette out the window. “Haven’t you heard? Everything’s

bad for your health. A friend once told me he's in a race to see which kills him first: the cops or lung cancer. You can't live your life afraid of dying."

"No offense, sir, but that's easy for you to say."

Boss feigned injury. "Oh, hey now. Not to sound like a nagging old geezer, but I was your age once. I knew what it was like to fear the reaper."

"Was it ever scary during the war, sir?"

"There you go, asking about that stuff again. Sure it was, like hell. There were lots of close calls. I worried about my friends a lot. I could've relaxed, though. They were all really strong—way stronger than me."

"I wouldn't say that, sir. At least, Lady Freya didn't."

Boss stared out the window, no comment on the late Crescent forthcoming. "…You know, I never really smoked until she died."

"Who, sir?"

"My wife."

Luth tipped his ears curiously. "Which one?"

The reminder crossed his features with a twinge. “My second.”

A deli deliveryman knocked, bringing some cheer back to the room with a pair of sandwiches and some soda. Boss set the lunch bag on the desk and was about to unwrap their selection when the office phone buzzed.

He picked it up, and Luth watched and listened with interest. “Yo.… Candy? Candy the pizza girl?” Alarm crept into his tone, setting Luth on edge. ‘Why did you let her up?… We have sandwiches. You just let the sandwich guy up. Why would I order a pizza—Oh very funny, Sheryl, I am NOT— “He pulled away from the handset, surprised.” Bitch hung up on me.’ He flung it down with an exasperated growl. “Argh, my love for that woman burns like hot, hot hate.”

“Uh, pizza girl?” Luth wondered cautiously.

Boss rubbed his temples. “It’s my jailbait curse, and she’s on her way.”

“*Jailbait* curse?”

“Well, I shouldn’t call it that, because ‘jailbait’ implies some kind of attractiveness, and she’s, uh… You’ll see.”

“I don’t get it, sir…”

He sat on the rim of his desk and steepled his fingers, brewing a plan. “I know how to handle this.…Sorta.” There was a wounded curl to his brow as he turned to Luth and asked, “I’m not getting ‘pudgy,’ am I?”

Luth put up his hands, tactfully backing off the subject. To his relief, a visitor barged in, the door noisily rattling after her. Judging by the hat and tacky uniform, she must’ve been the “pizza girl,” though there wasn’t a pizza box in sight. Candy was a reedy, freckled imp in carrot-orange pigtails, pink sneakers and matching braces, and the only thing faster than her bouncing heels was her mouth.

“Mr. U!” (Luth mouthed ‘Mr. U…?’ in bemusement.) “Oh my God, I just had to come by and see if you were alright because you haven’t ordered any pizza since January 3rd and I know you like the hand-tossed Triple-M pizza for lunch every Wednesday except you stopped was it because of that note I left in the box it wasn’t that bad I mean I didn’t mean it like that, I know I crossed a line but it was the way I felt and my gramma always tells me to be honest, well I mean just that one time at Uncle Tommy’s wake—”

“Slow down, tiger,” Boss checked her.

Candy drew a deep, nasally breath and resumed. “Right. But I had to come speak to you myself because it’s been so long and I haven’t heard from you—I mean, I didn’t scare you off, did I? I don’t want to do that I mean I’m not like *that girl* and I just wanted to know if you read the note and what you think about it and maybe if you want to maybe, maybe think the same way I do? Or try?”

Boss pinched his nose. “Geez…”

“Oh, please—”

“Please *what*?” he flared at her. “You’re what, fifteen? Sixteen? You realize that I am way, way, *way* too old for you, right? It’s pretty much illegal. And wrong. Wrong first, then illegal. Don’t want to confuse you, there.”

“I’ll be sixteen next month and my mom’s throwing a party all my cousins will be there—”

Boss held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, hold it. Just, hold your breath. I’ll go to your party.”

She looked about to faint as her wide, fawning eyes filled with glitter. “*Really*??”

Boss gave her pause with one raised finger. “On one condition. You see, there are two sandwiches here.” He dug them out of the bag and balanced one in each hand. “One is barbeque with mayo, and the other is meatball marinara—one of them, obviously, for me, and the other is for my partner here, Lu. If you can guess which one is for me, I will accept your invitation.”

Candy squawked with glee. “You, I—really?? Ohmigawd, which one?”

He shrugged indifferently. “All of them.”

“Oh, oh, oh—I—oh God are you serious? I have to think, wait a second—um, um…” She teetered on her toes, the weight of the decision about to tip her over. With a giddy spark, she pointed to his left hand. “The meatball! I mean, the meatball sandwich is yours, yes.”

“Wrongo, sorry.” He took the barbeque one and bit into it. Luth cheeped in protest in the background —that was *his* sandwich.

“Now,” Boss lectured her carefully while she stood shocked in defeat, “After your mom drives you home tonight, I want you to think about how

ready I was to commit to a relationship with a fifteen-year-old—”

“Almost sixteen!” she squeaked with clingy hope, like a withering vine.

Boss’s deadpan showed how much he cared. “Right. About how I made a decision on a serious emotional, physical and eventually financial commitment with an underaged high school pizza-jockey *via sandwich*. I want you to think long and hard.”

Candy worked her mouth like a beached fish. “But—but—”

The Genome impatiently waved her off. “Go now.”

She sped away, her eyes like broken glass and her small feet like nails along the creaky floorboards. “Geez…” Boss sardonically quipped in the aftermath, “I haven’t had that much trouble getting rid of chicks I’ve actually slept with.”

Luth shook his head. “That was kind of… cruel, sir.”

“Oh, you have no idea how long that was coming. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be

kind.” He caught the pained look Luth was aiming at the bitten sandwich and uttered flatly, “I can get you another sandwich, rookie.”

“How do you sleep at night?”

Both glanced to the doorway, and there Sheryl was. She was leaning against the frame, arms aloofly crossed with a self-righteous smirk.

Boss answered easily as he lit another cigarette, “Next to a beautiful, indiscriminating woman—sometimes two.”

“…Good answer,” even Luth had to concede.

Before she could upbraid anything, Boss nipped her. “Oh, don’t even start—and what, you came up here to watch?”

“Maybe,” she relented only slightly, and with a duplicitous grin she slipped out the way she came.

Luth’s hearing had cat-like precision. Whispering feet in the hall were as clear and evident as fingerprints.

It was almost nine o’clock that evening when he heard a disturbance outside his door. Since he and Boss were the only ones occupying the ninth floor, an unusual pattering was worth investigating. Luth had been especially suspicious since the doppelganger incident, and he opted to pry and peek at every visitor. Boss never rebuked his nosiness, even when he saw things better unseen—one of Susan’s “sessions,” for example.

Tonight it wasn’t any of Boss’s regular girls, though. When Luth peered out of his apartment, he saw the distancing strides of Sheryl’s graceful, long legs, heading towards the office. She walked with supple, prowling confidence, just like the tiger Boss claimed she resembled.

‘*Miss Sheryl is always so poised,*’ he mused in the back of his mind, and the front dressed him down. ‘*Sir is right, you do sound like a girl.*’ He rubbed his nose and stalked down the hall, careful not to stray into her field of vision. Sheryl always clocked out and went home right at five o’clock, so this late hour was strange for her. Luth couldn’t help his curiosity. He didn’t want to think of it as eavesdropping, because that was unethical, but… well, he was going to eavesdrop.

She gave the already-open door a perfunctory knock and sauntered in. Boss was still there? Luth had been dismissed hours ago, but he figured Boss would take off soon after. It was surprising to find him in the office when he was usually spending this time roaming the streets.

Luth perched just outside the threshold, one ear tuned through the crease along the door's hinges. He could see into a dim corner, and a hint of the window—the room was bathed in warm, solitary lamplight, and outside was a clear, shining night.

"Hey, Shirley."

"You're a bastard."

"I love it when you're direct. What're you still doing up here? It's late."

"Same thing you are, apparently."

"Yeah, lame-ass end-of-the-month reports."

"I figured you could use a distraction."

"I like propositions."

"I meant a drink, you jackass." The liquor cabinet gave a soft pop as it was opened, followed by clicking glass. There was a quiet while as drinks

were poured and Sheryl made herself comfortable on the sofa.

“So,” she started again, “Business has been interesting lately.”

“Sure has.”

“A lot of your ‘personal contracts’ dropped out this past week. Most on the same day.”

“Go figure.”

“The less I know, the better?”

“You know it.”

“So where does your protégé tie into this?”

“Mmm? What’s he got to do with it?”

“I’m not blind. I see you with him all the time. Where are you two?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Don’t be coy. You’re bad at it.”

“Fair enough. We’re close.”

“No kidding. How close?”

Luth knew that saying, *"Eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves."* All he heard now was silence.

"Intimate?" Sheryl prodded him.

"…Maybe." His voice was oddly reserved.

"Really?" The sofa cushions groaned as she leaned closer, interested. "Sexual?" she tried him, as if to see how far he'd go without objecting.

"Gettin' there," he called her bluff.

"No," she said flatly, incredulous.

"Sorta! We had a… thing. We were drunk. It wasn't serious!"

"How far?"

"Not all the way. Takin' it easy. He's not the type… y'know."

Picking at the underlying tone, Sheryl pursued the subject like a slinking panther. "Romantic?"

Boss gagged on his drink, and Luth had to suppress his own coughing. "God I hope not. I can't afford that shit."

"You're terrible. He's such a sweet, gullible boy."

“He is,” Boss soberly agreed.

“What are you going to do with him?”

“What aren’t I going to do with him?” he bawdily countered, and Sheryl snickered.

“You’re completely incorrigible.”

There was another lull, this one deeper and more comfortable, yet somehow… unsettling.

And then Boss said it, like a kick to the gut, nothing mistaken in the dead finality of it.

“I’m leaving.”

Sheryl was speechless. Luth was reeling. *Leaving*? Where? How? Beneath his stupor he knew the answers—most of them, but he didn’t want to think.

“Shocked?”

“No,” Sheryl smoothly responded. “I thought that you might.”

“That obvious?”

“I told you, you’re bad at it.”

“Well.” He idly cracked his knuckles. “You’re right.”

“How soon?”

“Soon enough. Soon as he’s ready.”

“You’ll break his heart.”

“I’ve broken many a’heart before.”

“This will be different and you know it. I see the way he is around you—he looks up to you.”

A harried sigh. “Yeah, I know. I don’t want to do it. It can’t be helped. He’ll understand, eventually.”

“You’ve corrupted a perfectly fine young man.”

“Far from the worst I’ve ever done.”

“They say corruption of the innocent is the greatest sin one can commit.”

“Phbt, ‘innocent.’ That’s a relative term. Nobody’s really innocent, if you think about it.”

“Devil’s advocate.”

“I didn’t take you for the religious type.”

“Everyone has their surprises. I go to church every week with Richard and his family.”

“Ew, I’m sorry. So how’s ol’ Dick?”

“The wedding’s this autumn.”

“Is it, now? I’m not invited?”

“I’ll let you know if we need it crashed.”

“Haha, aww. He’s still not sour over that little thing from last time, is he?”

“You broke his nose. I’d say that’s a definite possibility.”

“Well, I can’t take that back. His nose deserved it. It was too big.”

“I am not going to say anything to that.”

“You know I’m right.” On a vaguely patronizing note, he asked, “So, does it do anything for you? That church thing.”

“As a matter of fact, it does.”

“That’s good, that’s good. I’m very happy for you. Everyone needs something that makes them feel like they have a purpose in this world.”

“Hmm, I believe it. And what about you? What’s your great inspiration in life?”

“Sex, drugs and hard tunes,” he quoted a popular lyric.

“Nothing, then. Haven’t you ever considered going to church? Who knows, you might find it a rewarding experience.”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“No god’ll take me.”

She scoffed. “You’re full of rot.”

“Oh, I dunno.” Boss seemed flustered as he pecked at honesty. “I can’t feel comfortable in those places. It’s kinda like, eh, there’s this… mindset, y’know? People go there and… I don’t know. It’s so easy to judge people.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, it’s easy to take one look at a man and think you’ve got him figured out. ‘He’s a lawyer, all lawyers are blood-sucking con-artists,’ or, ‘He’s a politician, they’re all liars trying to get power,’ or, ‘She’s just a hooker, she’ll do anything for money, you can never trust her around your kids.’ Or how about, ‘Oh, he’s homeless. He must be a bum, too lazy to do any real work. Or he must be crazy. It’s

not like he has a family, or a wife and kids to support, or maybe he got laid off because his company started outsourcing to another continent, and he ran out of money to buy diapers and baby formula because the nine-to-close shift at McMoogles doesn't pay the rent and no one wants a welder from Lindblum anymore.' Because there's never another side to it. It has to be his fault. All dwarves are trashy alcoholics, all Genomes are crazy, all Cleyrans are tree-huggers, all Black Mages are the devil. I won't even start on the Burmecians."

'Gee thanks, sir.'

"'And what about that guy, he's rich. He has all the money in the world. He doesn't have to worry about bills, or debts, or anything. He can buy whatever he wants.…He must be happy.'"

Sheryl didn't say anything while he sat up in his chair. "And you let them do that. You let them think that. Because you think the same things, every day."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked with an edge of something Luth had never heard in Sheryl before—perhaps sympathy?

"I dunno, you said it: I'm full of crap," he glibly discredited himself.

“Where will you go?” she reverted the topic.

“Somewhere permanent.”

Luth swallowed a thick lump. “Permanent” had too many meanings, and it depended on who was talking: Boss or the King of Thieves. He wasn’t sure which was worse.

“I hope you’re not planning on doing anything stupid.”

“Hehe. ‘Where there’s life, there’s hope.’”

“Honestly. You’re giving me terrible thoughts.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be doing my job right if I didn’t.”

“I still don’t have to take that from you, mister,” she said stuffily.

“Haha, you never change. That’s why I keep you around. I’m going to make up a ‘File B’ for you to hold on to.”

“Normal human beings call them wills.”

“‘File B’ sounds so much cooler, though. Like secret agent talk.”

“For all the public knows about you, you might as well be a secret agent.”

Boss hummed a lame ditty from a spy movie, and then there was the sharp, leafy clatter of a flying magazine.

“Don’t quit your day job.”

“Hehe, but I will!”

“…You know, this will change everything. It won’t be the same without you.”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Lu can handle it.”

“That’s not quite what I meant. And what if he can’t? Or won’t?”

“Sounds like File B’s problem, not mine.”

“Tch. Selfish bastard.”

“I know.”

“He’s a sweet boy, but he’s hardly management material and you know it.”

“Hey, give the rookie some credit. I taught him everything I know!”

“Like what, how to tip a hooker?”

“That’s the advanced stuff. His first lesson was that if anything goes wrong, he makes you handle it.”

“You lazy bum.”

“That’s me.”

There was some muffled clacking as Sheryl’s heels met the floor. “…So. This is how it’ll end.”

“For me, anyway.”

When Luth heard the fabric of her suit brush closer, Luth knew it was time to bolt. He started back the way he came, barely overhearing the last bits.

“I have to ask, just once.”

“Shoot.”

“What is your real name?”

“Beelzebub.”

She gave a short, cynical chuckle. “I should’ve known. Don’t stay up too late, devil-boy.”

“You too. G’night.”

Luth was luckily behind his own doorway and out of dodge when Sheryl stepped back into the hall.

“Hey, Sheryl?”

She lingered one more second, glancing back into the office. “Hmm?”

“…Thanks.”

And that was all. Luth closed the door and withdrew to bed, his heart heavy with a portentous tomorrow.

A/N: What a somber note to leave on.

Only two more chapters! Coming up, the final confrontation with (what’s left of) the Red Angels. Old friends, old tricks, and a little help from above?

We’ll see next time in: The Festival.

15. The Festival

15. The Festival

The morning air was charged with some weighty static that roused Luth earlier than usual. He gazed out his balcony at the steely sky and had a feeling—a premonition, like… like *anything* could happen. He wasn't sure if it was a festering emotion from the night before or just a change in the weather, but he didn't want to sleep through it, at any rate.

He had his usual breakfast at the café and then paced around the office until Boss burst in, whistling a merry tune. "Goooood morning." Not skipping a beat, he greeted Luth with a jaunty hug, glided over to the desk and started bundling papers.

"You're in good spirits today, sir," Luth noticed, a little taken aback.

"I should be! I had a few."

Luth rolled his eyes. He thought he smelled something like port on his mirth. "It's not even noon, sir. Is there any way to improve your mood without drugs or alcohol?"

Boss quirked his brow. “That’s funny; Sheryl asked me that, too. Probably not!” He passed a roll of tickets to Luth. “Here’s some love letters for you, by the way. I hope you didn’t make the mistake of telling her you *like* filing.”

Luth peeled off the rubber band and skimmed the workload, mumbling, “I don’t mind it.”

He received a finger-wag. “That’s the kind of answer that gets you into trouble.”

Not meeting that remark or even looking up, Luth brushed by Boss and took the desk, getting down to business without him. Boss stiffened a bit at the cold shoulder, shrugged and then turned his attentions to a video game.

The rest of the morning passed in frigid half-silence, Luth overlooking the sundry quips and distractions Boss tossed his way. He didn’t really want to be rude, but he wasn’t in the mood to deal with Boss, either—and he was almost certain why, except he’d rather focus on cataloging than think about it.

Luth’s hand was forced, however, once Boss grew tired of being ignored. The Genome pushed his toy aside, crawled around the desk and draped

himself over the back of Luth's chair, playfully tangling his fingers in Luth's mop of brown hair. "Y'know, when I'm depressed it's one thing. When *you're* sulking, that's a bad sign. What's eatin' ya, rookie?"

Luth recoiled from the petting and noiselessly crossed his arms over his chest, shutting him out. Boss looked as if he was slapped in the face, and his waggish act was instantly dropped. He stood up and circled the chair, trying to confront Luth's veering gaze. "Are you mad at me?" he pried, worry tingeing his voice.

The Burmecian sighed and laid his palms flush on the tabletop, giving in. If he was going to settle anything, he was going to have to be direct. "Have you been teaching me how to run the office lately because you're going to leave soon?"

Boss startled, stepping back. It took him a moment to find his stubborn old bearings. "I told you not to worry about that."

Luth's gaze met him, pinning him down, petitioning. "But you'll warn me before you do something like that, won't you, sir?"

Boss’s smile was more of a flinch, eyes not quite connecting. “Of course.”

Luth could have called his bluff right there, telling him everything at the expense of confessing to eavesdropping, but before that plan could congeal Boss rapped his knuckles on the desk restively. “Anyway, go ahead and wrap this stuff up early today, so we can make it down to the park after lunch.”

The Burmecian perked his ears, intrigued. “You mean Artania Park? What are we doing there, sir?”

Boss threw him a farcical shrug. “We’re going to shoot pigeons, what do you think? It’s the festival, Lu.”

He started, pleasantly surprised. The Festival of the Hunt had completely slipped his mind. “It’s today? Really? You have tickets?” he prodded, not hiding his excitement well.

The Genome thumped his chest smugly. “Please, look who you’re talking to. Of course I have tickets. We’re going to meet Gribbo and the guys on the boardwalk.”

Luth’s moody countenance melted with a smile. “I can’t wait. I’ve always wanted to see it in person,

not just on the TV.”

Happy for Luth’s change of heart, Boss folded his arms and cocked a grin of his own. “Well, here’s your big chance.”

The Genesis Building was the tallest freestanding building in Lindblum—in the world, actually. Only Lindblum Grand Castle dwarfed it in total height and majesty. It was a sleek crystal obelisk, its edges dressed in blades of turquoise and its smooth glass sides catching the sun at all angles of the day. It overlooked the immense fountain-lake of Artania Park, throughout which animal cargo trucks were pulling into strategic positions, preparing to unleash their payload for the day’s competition.

A serpentine brick wall known as the boardwalk semi-enclosed the park, and upon it hundreds were gathering early to get a good look into the grassy, neatly forested grounds that would soon be swamped with monsters. Those not fortunate enough to have a spot reserved on the boardwalk were settling into the watchtowers cornering the park, as well as the arena on the south end that typically hosted other sports—now it was a meeting ground

for competitors, stragglers, festival staff and film crews. A laser hologram pyramid spanning over a hundred feet was fired up in the middle of the field for the bleacher-bound to watch, its display covering every nook in the park that a camera could safely chance.

He had an eagle's view of everything from the second-tallest building in the area, a perishing old high-rise that was only remarkable because it stood on a hill. It was his perfect vantage point, deserted and aloof.

His pale, heavy hands were knobby and sharp like the feet of a hawk, though they didn't detract from the beauty of the large garnet between his fingers. Its every facet was perfectly polished, and even under the grey skies it shone with a deep, unquenchable fire.

"Can you feel the pulse of the planet?" he serenaded it, the bitter wind an instrument to his murmuring, dulcet tones. "Can you feel its beating heart, in our deepest memories?"

He held it high, admiring it in place of the sun, and a grin slithered across his narrow visage.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Bahamut?"

“We’re going to be late, sir.”

Luth was watching the pre-festival parade on the office’s clunky, antiquated TV set while he waited for Boss to… find the last treasure on *Chocobo Hot & Cold*. The Genome squatted on his toes on the edge of the sofa, wrestling with the buttons on his GamePocket.

“Shuddup, I almost got it,” he grunted.

Luth quaintly shook his head and turned back to the news, where a man in a blue, zigzag-striped suit was raving over the weather.

“Happy Friday, festivinos! No bright, shiny sun today, folks, but chances of rain are slim—good news for our festival today. A slight breeze and all the clouds are gonna take the edge off that summer heat, but you unfurries still be sure to wear sunscreen and drink plenty of water. That said, we’ll now go to our field reporter, Miss Julia Knickoff.”

He felt a funny squeeze in his gut as the scene switched to a crowded city block. People were corralled onto the sidewalks by rudimentary gates while decorated cars, hoverboats, giant balloons and a marching band cruised down the road at a leisurely

clip. Small bodies scurried and squealed around their parents, pointing at the flowery floats with tiny, candy-sticky fingers. The reporter stood off to the side in the foreground, softly beaming at the camera.

“Thank you, Jim! I’m on Tanner Street right here outside Artania Park, where the festival parade is in full swing. You can see some of the floats behind me, and they’re just enormous. The children are especially enjoying them—that’s Eddie the Flan passing by right there.

“Earlier I was in Daller Stadium, speaking with some of the upcoming participants in the hunt. We have almost fifty entrants this year, so it’s bound to get really heated. Something interesting about the festival every year is the sheer variety of weapons the participants bring into the park. As you know, firearms are banned within city limits here in Lindblum, but every other kind of weapon under the sun is acceptable for this event. I’ve been meeting the contestants and finding everything in their arsenal from throwing knives and darts to huge swords and spears—one will even be using a bow and arrow. Using these antique weapons is part of keeping the spirit of the festival, a tradition that dates back over seven hundred years, to the founding of the city.

“Once the parade is over, the hunt will officially be underway. We’ll be covering the event from inside the stadium, while the animals and contestants are going to be released in the park. When I asked how many monsters we will see this year, the beastmaster just assured us that there will be plenty of meat for the banquet, so we can all look forward to that!”

“Phbt, pussies,” Boss interjected with a haughty snort, his eyes still glued to his game. “Back when I was your age, the whole city was fair game. People just boarded up their doors and windows and tried not to piss their pants.”

Luth crumbled into a fit, holding the bridge of his nose as he chortled, “Hehehehe, hee!”

Boss put down the GamePocket, flexed his shoulders and shot him a puzzled look. “It wasn’t that funny.”

He quelled his humor with a gasp. “Oh, no sir, I was just thinking about something I read in Lady Freya’s diary, about the time she competed in the festival with you.”

Boss received the memory with a roguish grin. “Heh, what did she have to say?”

“She said you cheated, sir,” Luth said with a smart smirk, and Boss fell backwards into the cushions, kicking and laughing hard.

“Hahaha! Oh…!” He tumbled out of the sofa, landing cat-like on his bare feet. “Hey, we ready to go?”

Before Luth could say, the whole building shuddered in tune with an explosive shriek, one sounding in the great distance. Both paused and spun wary looks around the room.

Boss scratched the back of his head, perplexed. “The heck was that?”

“Thunder, maybe?”

“I don’t think…” Boss’s speculation tapered off as he scaled the sofa to look out the window. Meanwhile, on the TV, Luth glimpsed a parade balloon rocketing into a row of streetlights, a streak of fire tearing it asunder. The answer to this was an outbreak of screams from the audience, which scattered beneath its flaming descent.

“Oh my God!” Julia’s voice rose over the wails. “There’s been a terrible accident; one of the balloons has ignited and fallen into the crowd. It’s almost like a fireball just fell out of the sky and—”

Another cloud-shattering roar. The camera jerked upwards, revealing a bat-shaped blot against the unfocused sky.

“Oh my God, what is that?” Not even the reporter had a clue. Before the cameraman could nail the sighting, it jetted off screen, only to reappear seconds later as a speck fluttering towards the horizon. The apparition stalled over a distant spire, and zooming in brought its sinister features to light: massive leathery wings; a ponderous, plate-ribbed tail; thick claws on stringy limbs and handlebar horns crowning its hooked beak. Its skin was molten obsidian and its cry was like a thousand birds of prey dying in unison.

Luth was gawking at none other than a dragon. Julia rambled on in some semblance of professionalism.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know what we’re looking at! I think it’s a dragon, a very large one. It just attacked one of the floats with a fireball, and it’s —oh my God!”

Boss was leaning over his shoulder, likewise gaping at what unfolded next. The flying serpent circled the world’s tallest freestanding building just once before rearing over it and spitting a twinkling

magnesium bulb dead onto its peak. As Luth watched the hot ball plunge, all he could think about were the signs on airship decks warning people not to drop coins off the side, lest they plummet hundreds of feet, strike a person and cause injury—or worse, and this was worse, worse than any penny ever imagined, and it didn't merely strike its mark; it phased clean through it, blotting out the tower's flagpole and sinking through the roof as if nothing were there. Windows and steel beams and splintered and blew outwards, showering the surrounding blocks in scorching debris as a column of fire billowed down the building's spine. Eventually—impossibly—mind-bendingly slowly, the whole edifice vaporized in one slow, fluid pulse, like a lazy-spring collapsing into itself.

Within seconds, nothing remained in its spot but a cloud of dust and smoke. A dreadful, shocked silence filled the airwaves, and then seemingly the entire world. A child started crying, a man swore mightily, and the moment was broken.

People started pushing each other over, rushing in haphazard directions as Julia continued narrating, "I don't think this is part of the festival, I don't think this is supposed to happen. That dragon is out of control; it's destroying everything in its path. It just

attacked the Genesis Building, it's gone now, there's nothing left—ladies and gentlemen this is not a joke, this is a crisis. I'll try to keep recording as long as I can…"

Luth finally remembered to breathe, though the wave of nausea he had to blink back wasn't from lack of air. "Oh dear gods…"

"Holy shit on a spit," Boss cursed. "That's no ordinary dragon! That's Bahamut!"

"What?! An *eidolon*?"

"It's a goddamn eidolon!" Not wasting another second, Boss threw open the door and stormed out. "Son of a *bitch*! Let's go!"

Luth bolted after him, stumbled a bit in the hall, and then decided to raid his room for arms. His travel pack was pasted quick to his side and his fingers were just brushing the grip of his halberd when he hesitated, something more powerful reaching out to him from the corner of his eye.

He wet his lips and approached the Dragon's Hair in the opposite corner, kneeling before he dared take it. One hand delicately closing around the gilded shaft, he closed his eyes and whispered, "Great

dragon gods, hear me. Help me do the right thing. Lady Freya…”

He didn’t finish the prayer; Boss’s tearing invective down the hall jarred his thoughts and got him back on his feet. He was standing inside the Genome’s door in two beats, watching with curious anxiety as Boss burrowed headfirst to the bottom of his wardrobe. He was already wearing sneakers and a pair of daggers on his belt.

“Sir?”

“Wait, wait—wait wait wait.” His tail hacked at his heels in a tantrum. “Geez, where the fuck is it?”

“Um, sir, we have to hurry—”

“I know, just hang on! I know something that can help. She can help us.”

“She?”

Boss slammed a cardboard box against the wall and it blew up, a spray of beads, buttons and baubles tinkling across the room. “Shit, it’s not here! Where did I…?” He jumped up with a spark. “Ah damnit, the vault!”

Luth followed him through the fire escape and down the stairs, trying his best to mentally assemble

the puzzle while sliding down the handrails.

“Um, are we looking for a *person*? In your closet?”

“Milda! She’s an ‘Ancient’—that’s what she’ll tell you, anyway. And she’s in the vault, not my closet!”

“What??” Luth was utterly confused.

“Remember those people I told you about who live practically forever? Milda’s one of them.”

They jumped down the steps so fast they hit bottom before they could even see it. Boss sprinted through the dark maintenance corridor and skidded into the blind corner sheltering the hatch and lock.

“You should install lights down here, sir,” Luth panted.

“I don’t exactly want people *finding* this, Lu.”

“Do we really have time for this?” he questioned while Boss fumbled with the key.

“No, but we can’t afford to go without it. It’s worth it, trust me.”

The door gave with a cranky groan, and Boss darted down the pitch stairs before Luth could respond. “…I trust you, sir.”

Luth made his best effort to keep up, but the flimsy wooden steps weren’t that courteous, and eventually he gave up and waited for Boss to find the light switch. One conspicuous click later, the chamber buzzed into sight, and Luth approached Boss next to a chest laden with glittering gems.

The Genome sifted through the booty until his hand snagged the real treasure within. “Aha! Got ’er.” Boss showed it off for all of a second: a lurid red ball encased in shard of green quartz, nothing bigger than the palm of his hand. Not waiting for the imminent queries, Boss took off with it, back the way he came.

“Where are you going?” Luth chased him.

“Up! Com’on, to the roof!”

Luth was grateful he’d worked up enough wind to make it back up the nine flights of stairs without breaking their pace—and if Boss was worn out, he didn’t show it, either. They came to halt on the gritty pavement capping the building, right where Luth

usually stood in training—he could point out where his old halberd left scratches in the cement.

“Okay,” Boss huffed, holding the treasure shard at arm’s length and leveling an intent gaze on it. “Here goes nothin’. You might wanna stand back.”

“Um…” Luth complied a step or two. He had no idea what to expect, so he merely observed.

He could see Boss mouthing something just out of ear’s reach, lost in the rooftop’s gales. The transparent shard began to glow, ethereal green tendrils fanning out of its core, and then it started floating skyward, the light turning iridescent and growing more intense by the second. With a sudden, heart-stopping crack it erupted, coils of light and color pouring free and coalescing in a silvery cascade. The formless plasma painstakingly took shape, a giant molding forth—scarlet-tipped feathers; bulky shoulder blades; a silky tail; a proud chin beneath a prominent snout; dark, glistening pits for eyes; a barrel trunk; meaty legs; elegant claws and a pearly hide, emerald-shaded.

Luth, awestruck, didn’t realize he was sitting on his rump until it was all finished. The summoned creature towered over the two, ruffling its wings experimentally. It lowered a needling look at Boss.

He threw his arms out in an enthusiastic greeting. “Milda! Long time no see.”

Gradually the stern gleam to its eye faded, its strong muzzle crinkled warmly, and it dipped its neck slightly to nod. From the depths of sound, past the ears and straight into the mind, it spoke with a mother’s soothing grace. *‘Hello, Time Bender.’*

“I know it’s short notice,” Boss beseeched, “But think you could give us a hand?”

‘With what, child?’

Boss dramatically waved past her, where not even six streets away, Bahamut was ripping bodily through a water tower. It gushed and teetered until its spindly supports snapped into useless twigs, dropping the entire structure onto a stack of aircabs. The explosion of water and fire crackled over the ensuing screams of panic below.

‘I see,’ Milda flatly acknowledged the carnage. *‘I will do what I can.’*

Boss clapped in relief. “You’re the best.” He spun to face Luth and indicated the guest with a broad wave. “Com’on Lu, Milda will give us a ride.”

Luth picked himself up, stammering, “She will?! But that’s a… it’s a…”

“She’s a silver dragon, yeah.”

Milda steadily corrected him, *‘This is just my corporeal form. I am an Ancient.’*

Boss made sure his back was to the Ancient when he rolled his eyes at that. Returning to his dragon-skittish partner, he patiently explained, “She won’t bite you. She’s here to help. Milda is awesome.”

She bowed, wings stooped accommodatingly to the ground. *‘Come with me, Dragon Knight of Gaia.’*

Luth blinked, shook off his apprehension and took Boss’s lead up to Milda’s side. He was going to trust Boss, right? They were going to stop Bahamut… somehow. They were going to save the city. They were going to do something absolutely crazy and probably get killed.

“All right, then.” Boss swung onto the silver dragon’s shoulders as if they were as easy and comfortable as a chocobo’s back, and it was impossible that he was not the King of Thieves again, two hundred years and born anew. He offered Luth a hand up, and the Crescent couldn’t resist. He

wiggled in behind the Genome, getting a grip on Milda's thick ribs and trying not to stick his feet in the downy web of her wings.

"Let's go kick some ass!" Boss whooped, and Milda took off, her great feathery wings heaving against the city updrafts.

As they took flight into the pandemonium, armed only with some daggers and an antique polearm, Lady Freya's words sprang into Luth's mind—ruby and sapphire and brimstone, clear and cracked and perfect.

We followed him into Valhalla. We followed him into Hell. We had all lost our minds, and it was glorious.

A/N: I am a terrible, terrible liar. *Now* there's two chapters left.

Well, the story goes that I was writing so far into this chapter when I realized that: A) This one was going to end up really, really frickin' long, and B) I was at a pretty good stopping point. So I split it up. Second half coming soon! Aren't weekly updates nice?

Next time, we wrap up this final battle business in: The Rapture.

16. The Rapture

16. The Rapture

Sirens from fire trucks and police airboats were already resonating throughout the city, layered over the keens of fleeing citizens, honking car horns and the occasional volcanic blast.

“What’s our plan, sir?” Luth asked, surprising himself with a level voice, even after having to raise it over the ambient wind and noise pollution.

“Milda,” Boss got straight to that, “Can you find where Bahamut was summoned?”

‘I can find the source stone, yes.’

“Great, take us to it.”

Kill the summon at the source—that made enough sense to Luth. But where, and what, and who? Eidolons were extinct in this modern age—until now, he supposed. There was still the legend that someone possessing all the Jewels… “The Red Angels are behind this, aren’t they, sir?”

Boss didn’t respond. Milda’s wings turned rigid beneath the wind, taking the party on a centrifugal course around Bahamut’s field of mayhem. If Luth weren’t so horrified by the carnage off the port side, he’d be marveling at the weightless rush of riding a real dragon over the city.

Bahamut was blazing his own trail across the urban landscape, paving the thoroughfares in sulfuric vomit and latching like a giant demon mantis onto hovercabs that buzzed too close. The dragon sank his heinous talons into the roof of a flying taxi, hoisted it off its axis and swung it bodily at a circling police car. The vehicles smashed together in a fit of grinding engines and crumpling metal, and dropped like a bombshell across a *Kaliroth Home & Garden* storefront, everything going up in an oily puff of flame.

Two more squad cars responded, careening around the dragon’s back and loosing gunshot off the stalky turrets mounted on their tops. Bullets stuck pinholes through the wings and sparked off the calloused ridges along the dragon’s backside, and with a clipped cry Bahamut cringed and whirled towards the assault, one firm stroke of his wings tossing the assailants on a tidal gust. The eidolon surfed up to one of the rolling cars, caught it by the

heavy coil of his tail, crushed it like a soda can and then whipped it aside, not even pausing to watch it collide with an airbulance, and then a church spire. There was a gong-like warble accompanying the screeching aluminum as it all crashed together, smoke and dust jetting into the thickening sky.

“We have to hurry!” Luth stressed, though needlessly. Before his thought was finished Milda blandly announced, *‘It is here.’*

The two passengers stuck out their necks to espy Milda’s target, sinking ever-nearer: a boxy high-rise atop one of the Residential District’s hills. Artania Park and the brand new Genesis Crater were easily in its sights. It was twenty floors of rotten red bricks and ugly, broken little windows, and its rooftop was much like the one they just departed, though the cement was tarnished a more dismal grey and the cabinet to the stairwell was sheared away, leaving a grave-esque pit.

No matter how much he expected it, Luth was still disarmed by the scene they encountered once Milda touched down on the building’s summit. The flat, open lot was barren save the opposite corner, where a pair of Genomes awaited. They followed the arrivals with smug leers, unfazed by their zuu-

winged, behemoth-sized carrier. Luth didn't especially recognize the one on the left—he was short, golden-blonde and box-cheeked, and over his black jumpsuit he wore a brazen scarlet sash—but in his ice-blue eyes he saw a stark version of Boss, and Luth had to flinch away.

He knew Maroon when he saw him, though. Also clad in emblematic black and red, the leader of the Red Angels was welcoming the band with a quiet, insidious front, strangely patient. He didn't budge to greet them, poised like a statue in the center of an elaborate glyph drawn in some kind of red ink on the ground (Luth wasn't going to imagine anything more depraved than paint, for his own sake.) His presence, however, was diminished in light of the four diamond-cut artifacts placed evenly around the rune-circle. Luminous spectrums throbbed across their facets, ages of pent-up energy shining in all hues.

"The Jewels!" Boss exclaimed, springing off Milda's back and squaring himself across from their foes. Maroon didn't yet make a move; he just appraised the invaders while his accessory stood at panther-like attention, ready to pounce. His eyes locked with Boss's, and Luth felt even the wind freeze.

It was strange to see them standing at odds like that, now that Luth knew who they really were. It wasn't like Burmecia, where there was the group of heroes against the rain-cloaked gang of shadows and their mysterious leader. Now everything was laid true and wrong in the glaring daylight, and there wasn't a good guy verses a bad guy—just father and son and a bleak showdown. Boss, bouncing bright and forever sixteen, looked more like he could be Althier's offspring than the other way around, and the maroon-steeped man held himself with all the distinguished weight of the world that his father should have.

Luth, ready to break the tension and join his companion, had one foot over Milda's shoulder when Boss held him off with an open hand. "Stay back. I'll handle this."

"Sir!"

"Don't start, Lu," Boss brusquely put him down, no games in his tone. "I want to take care of this little family matter myself."

Luth gulped, his nervous gaze not straying far from Maroon—though the man merely surveyed their exchange with a grim smirk. "Are you sure?"

he asked in a low key, tying in with Milda's sentiment, *'Are you sure you wish to do this alone?'*

Boss faced the enemy with a stout sigh. "Oh yeah… I'm sure."

"But," Luth floundered, "What am I supposed to do?"

He swept a tentative glance over the horizon, watching it rapidly dissolve into black clouds. "Look, I know this is a lot to ask, but you and Milda have to stop Bahamut."

Luth focused on the cinder-demon breaching layers of city traffic, playing through bobbing and swerving cars—both the ground-rolling and airborne kinds, turning one into the other at his twisted caprices. When another cruiser tailed him too closely, Bahamut batted it out of the park and then sneezed a pellet of lightning, blowing the craft out of the sky like a clay pigeon.

"Stop the King of Dragons," Luth rephrased, his voice wavering incredulously. "Right."

Boss, however, was direly serious. "Stop it, get it out of here, get everyone out of here—do something before any more people get hurt!"

“But—”

His boss vehemently turned on him. “Hey, you’re a Dragon Knight, right?”

“Not quite, but—”

There were a thousand “but” s, all too late. Boss pointed at the eidolon with one hand and slapped Milda’s flank with the other, spurring the latter into a shaky leap. “Well there’s a dragon! Handle it!”

“Easy for you to say,” Luth muttered, not for the first time, as his silver mount carried him into oblivion.

Maroon’s insolent smirk only broadened as Milda flapped away, taking the Burmecian and leaving Boss behind. Genomes ruled the roof now, and in light of the situation Maroon glanced sidelong at his comrade and jeered, “Here comes my father, the noble traitor.”

His accomplice sniggered, but the obscure barb glanced off Boss, who was lost on Maroon’s appearance. He could see the resemblance now—not to any child he used to know, but to *him*… if he had managed to last another twenty years. His slender,

alabaster countenance crinkled around the edges, though the fine slope to his eyebrows, nose and chin made an unmistakable vision, especially when his hair fell in spiny auburn petals around his shoulders.

When he finally addressed his elder, his voice was strung cold, each word an icicle tinkling to the ground. “So, you’re alive. It’s true, then: you really are the immortal King of Thieves.”

Boss shook his thoughts into focus, the moniker stirring up some sensitive bile—it helped him work up the gall to start on a scathing note. “‘Maroon,’ huh? That hair color looks shitty on you.”

He chuckled and affectedly flicked a tuft of fading purple-red away from his high-boned cheeks. “Flattery will win you no mercy, I’m afraid. And it served its purpose; you didn’t even recognize me.”

“Well, you can’t blame me. I’ve never had a son run off and join the circus before.”

Maroon twitched resentfully, but his haughty smile quickly smoothed over it. “You’re not talking like someone who wants to survive this nice little reunion.”

“I don’t want to kill you,” Boss said, even as his right hand betrayed him, curling around the grip of a

dagger.

Maroon laughed outright. “It’s not going to be a very fair fight then, because I want to kill you.”

It was Boss’s turn to twitch. “You’ve changed,” he remarked, his tone a cocktail of disappointment and dismay. “You’re not the Alfy I remember.”

“And you’ve *never* changed,” Maroon spat, suddenly vitriolic. “You’re still the same selfish, arrogant fool you always were. You think I don’t know your name, Zidane Tribal?”

That gave Boss pause. From his silence Maroon assumed initiative, stepping out of his magic circle to launch a narrative.

“I’ll admit I was confused, at first. I heard someone had taken over Ultima Express in my name, but that was impossible. I wasn’t going to care, until I saw that it was you. I had to know how you did it—how you were still alive, well and so… so *young* after all this time. Never mind that; you were supposed to be dead. The truth was beyond me, until I found this…”

He reached into a black satchel at his side and threw out a familiar book. The old leather scuffed

across the gritty cement, and its withered pages quivered in the breeze. “Then it all became clear.”

Boss gaped, recognizing the keepsake right away. “Hey, that belongs to Lu!”

“I’m afraid your pet rat is going to have much, much bigger problems than his granny’s missing diary in the immediate future—that is, if he’s unlucky enough to survive the wrath of the King of Dragons.”

His knuckles turned white with a sick shudder as he realized what he’d done; he’d recklessly thrown his righty to the big, bad wolf. Even with Milda at his side, Luth barely stood a chance. Boss was flushed with horror and guilt before deep, miserable revulsion set in—for himself as well as this doppelganger daring to call him Father. “You, you… What’s your game?!”

Maroon’s mien turned dark as he raved, “You are the game! King of Thieves… King of Lies! You’re nothing more than an idle, mangy dog before our great plan. You represent everything vile Gaians have to offer. You embrace their sins; you pander to their criminals; you waste away in debauchery and deceit. You are a loathsome creature, unworthy of us

—unworthy even of the dogs you're going to die with!"

Boss couldn't stand how ridiculous that sounded. "Oh, will you get off of yourself? You and your grunts are nothing but common terrorists!"

"And you are a traitor!!"

"You're not making any sense! Are you insane?"

Maroon began to shriek, all his zeal channeled through a teenager's frivolous tantrum, until Boss was looking at a middle-aged man shaking his fists and crying, "You were the chosen one! You were going to save Terra from its cycle of death! You wanted to help people? You turned your back on an entire planet! *Our* planet! And for what? For your precious mortal friends, now rotting in their graves? For your Gaian women? For your brothers, living in exile, scorned and pushed aside by the Gaian dogs? For the brother you killed in the Tree of Life?"

Boss's heart cringed in his chest, stunting any response.

"Answer me, mongrel! Everything precious to you is dead and worthless! The people of Terra could have lived forever!"

“Shut the *fuck up*!” Boss exploded, that dagger he was trying to keep subdued suddenly in his outstretched hand. “The only son-of-a-bitch around here is you!”

Maroon mellowed with a hollow laugh, reveling in spite. “Hahaha, an ironic outburst.” Ignoring the fresh blade, he strolled to the ledge and mused over the shambles beyond, “Do you know the real tragedy of the Mist War? So much lost potential. The Gaians already had all the magic they needed. If only they had embraced the gifts Kuja practically laid in their laps, today we’d be living in the land Garland promised—a land where magic and machine and life and death are one. It would be the real Utopia, our true destiny. But no. Today we have this… monstrosity of civilization instead.”

Boss growled, fighting to keep his feet grounded and his temper even. “The hell’re you talking about?”

He indicated the wailing castle-city with a flourish. “Look at your bold, brave new world, Father. Look at the children of steam, running around like stupid, panicked chocobos, ignorant of what they lost. It’s as if everything that gave humanity the chance to excel evaporated with the

Mist. Instead of trying to enhance their magic with the technology the Mist gifted them, people tried to replace it, bit by bit. Suddenly magic wasn't 'popular' anymore; it was something to be avoided —people were scared of it. They saw what it did to their cities and they cowered before powers they refused to comprehend. It's the same old story that broke the Jewel into four pieces to begin with.

"Just look at this sham of a festival—a bunch of hacks pretending at strength and valor, fighting over squirrels. There are no more grand dragons; no more real monsters to test man's mettle. There are no more true warriors. Dragon Knights are a joke. The castle of the Ipsen has sank into dust. The Summoner bloodline has dwindled into a bunch of feckless heirs who couldn't conjure a potato. Those things still calling themselves Black Mages are just powerless, simple-minded husks of what used to be —just too… too *human*. Today's humans are pathetic. Their idea of a magician is someone who does parlor tricks for children's birthday parties. Their religions are empty and fake. Even the eidolons have abandoned them!

"You know as well as I, Father, that it wasn't that long ago when people knew how to build ships that soared on the wings of souls, and could teleport

from here to there with a clay pot and an enchantment. Now nobody knows how to get anything done without their precious ‘science’ and ‘computers.’ It’s only in the past twenty years that they’ve finally phased out their primitive *fossil fuels*. They’ve shut their minds to magic. The old Terra was ten times what the Gaians will ever achieve.”

Boss could hear him, but he couldn’t believe it. “Who gives a shit?” he crudely riposted. “What the hell are you driving at? Yeah, magic has faded away, but we never needed it to start with! We’re strong enough without it!”

Maroon brashly turned to him. “Is that what you believe? Or is that just an excuse? Do you just not want to admit that without the magic that let you and your friends subdue the Necromancer, your strength means nothing?”

His other dagger jumped to the fore. “I’ll admit that you’re full of crap! You don’t know anything about being strong.”

Enticed by that outburst, Maroon pulled a scimitar out of its hidden sheath and over his shoulder. His cool sneer was reflected over the foreign runes (Terran, maybe—they were too far

away for Boss to read) meticulously etched in the steel.

"Then teach me."

Milda was on top of things. *'What is our plan?'*

"Uh…" They were soaring high and idle, the wind coursing through one ear and out the other. Luth couldn't think to save his own life, much less those of the entire city. Then he spotted the *Channel 8* van far below, its tiny camera crew fanned over the street corner next to a smoldering blob of parade balloons. "Oh gods, wait a minute, let me down there!"

Milda complied, slipping into a tight spiral that lowered them through the jutting architecture and onto the opposite side of Tanner Street. This part of the district was lucky; aside from one meteor-smashed decoration, Bahamut hadn't yet touched it. Julia was conferring with a standing camera and two crewmates as they monitored the Dragon King, now six blocks away and meandering closer—the vicinity was otherwise abandoned. Luth dismounted and crossed the field of empty cars, bounding up to the rogue news team in a flurry.

“Julia—I mean, Miss Knickoff!”

“Who—Luth? Is that you?” She seemed genuinely surprised. She probably never expected to see him again, much less see him barging into her airtime with an ancient flying beast in tow. “What are you doing here?”

“What, I…” Luth stammered, abashed by her forwardness. He shook his head and snapped back, “What are *you* doing here?”

Around a far corner, another pool of cars splattered with a violent, firy pop, one craft clipping the corner of a bank and shattering a limestone column. A gargoyle toppled off the ruined support and smashed the car’s windshield as dust and rock washed the intersection.

“The city is under attack! I’m covering the story!” she eagerly explained over the calamity.

“Tha—that’s not wise! The city is under attack!” Luth sputtered obviously.

“Yes, I know! This could be the story of my career!”

Luth couldn’t believe her audacity. “It’ll be your last story if you don’t seek cover!”

She shook her head, an insistent line drawn on her brow. “I can’t go! Everyone needs to see this! Don’t you understand?”

Resorting to second opinions, Luth turned to the pair of addled men attending the camera—which was active, he then noticed. He didn’t have the time or patience to care how he looked on the news, though. He put one stern foot forward and bellowed with a vigor he’d never heard off his own tongue before, “Get out of here, *now*!”

Luth wasn’t sure if it was the hulking weapon strapped to his back, the dragon parked across the street, or they were just looking for any excuse to run for their lives, but the crewmen didn’t have to be told twice. They hitched up their equipment and scrambled into the van. Julia was flabbergasted in their wake, and she threw Luth a look of shocked betrayal.

“I’ll explain later, just go,” Luth tried to apologize, but he didn’t hear Julia’s response. Milda loomed up to his side, ready to go, and before Luth could take anything back he was up and away again.

Maroon made the first move, leaping into a charge, sword swinging down and springing off the daggers that rose to throw it off. The Red Angel bent back on his knees and held his weapon at half-tilt, anticipating a strike, but when Boss didn't step in to counter Maroon slid forward, scimitar eagerly chipping at the shorter Genome's defenses.

Boss wasn't fighting back. He couldn't; his normally loose nerves were too tense to give his muscles the leeway to lash out. His daggers caught each swipe of Maroon's scimitar with wobbling, uncertain jerks, and each step was made in retreat. It was almost as if he couldn't control his own body, and that distressing idea only exacerbated the matter.

Fighting was supposed to be the easy part. He always felt more comfortable negotiating with his daggers than his words—well, not always. It was a mindset he developed over a long time, first out of impatience, then apathy, and then a hybrid of both—too many long years of dealing with people like Pevy, when in the end all they listened to was bloodshed.

The gods knew he could smooth-talk a behemoth down from a heap of gold if he was so inclined, and he wasn't a violent person—really, all his friends

said so—but if it came down to it, he would spare no modesty to admit: he was damn good at it. He could carve out a zaghnol's spine in less than fifty paces and neuter a fully-grown grand dragon in what remained, but putting that kind of force to another human being made him shaky, even years after growing jaded with the value of a soul (particularly his own, stagnant and rankling in his ageless body.)

There were times that, maybe, he should've gone for the throat—the world might know more Cleyrans today, at the expense of some Alexandrian soldiers and Black Mages, but who was to say which lives were worth more? He didn't want to judge; he just wanted to help everyone. However, when Maroon told him mercy was for the weak, just one rainfall ago, it was a haunting echo of a certain flaming bounty hunter, preaching the same across centuries.

"You're wasting your time. You can't save everyone. If you try, you'll only lose them all. You have to suck it up and make a choice."

No matter how many times he was faced with it, the choice was never easy. It would've been simpler if it were just Bahamut, or some nameless summoner bent on senseless destruction. He could handle those things; he'd met and conquered

stranger, and stronger. However, this was his *son*, the only one he ever had (that he knew of), and now, the only thing that could make Boss even defend himself was the realization that the other man was deadly serious—not only about taking Boss's life, but all of Lindblum with it.

"Fight back, you cur!" His faltering was frustrating Maroon, at least, and the scimitar strokes grew more reckless, eventually driving Boss into a corner. At the end of the road and disgusted with the cowardly shuffling, the dominant fighter planted his feet and drew up a potent blow, and Boss saw the opportunity he had been waiting for. His right blade swept by Maroon's ribs, and as he doubled over the feint, the hilt of the left dagger cracked against his wristbone. Maroon cawed painfully as his sword got punched out of his hand, clanged off the cropped wall skirting the roof and plunged to the parking lot, twirling like an autumn leaf the whole way.

Maroon staggered back and clutched his disarmed wrist, snarling. Boss calmly stood over him, one blade still extended. "Give it up," he simply demanded.

Maroon's murderous glare shifted into yet another serpent-grin, and Boss saw some trickery in

the tail unfurling behind his legs. He didn't think to jump away until the smoke bomb ignited at his feet, blowing a stinging plume of mist into his face.

Boss coughed and tried shake the tears out of his eyes, waving his daggers blindly through the haze. By the time his vision resurfaced there appeared the second Genome, swooping in like a bird of prey, throwing knives cinched between his knuckles like talons. With no more room to retreat, Boss fell down instead, his shoulders hitting the pavement and his feet flying up to catch the assailant mid-pounce. His heels buried in a set of kidneys and Boss kept rolling back, taking the attacker's own momentum and boosting him wholesale over the edge.

Maroon's aide didn't even scream as he was pitched twenty stories to his demise. Boss climbed upright in time to watch him clatter wetly against the sidewalk, every bone splintering limply like a wooden doll. Eerily, Boss noticed, the angel didn't bleed—he just lay like a black fly squashed against a windshield, his leader's lost sword in the gutter beside him.

A patter of feet on slick cement snagged his attention, and Boss spied Maroon's tail ducking down the stairs. He sprang after him, leaving

everything—the Jewels, Freya's diary and a dead body—for later.

It was only a matter of time before Bahamut grew bored with small game and started raining his affections on bigger, grander things—and nothing was grander than the castle at the hub of the city. With his rocketing breath he began whittling off whole chunks of the keep at a time, house-sized patches of the outer brick wall being reduced to pulp and sand. One of the protruding airship docks was virtually melted off its hinges, and as it wilted towards the ground a succession of tankers and boats listed out of their shackles and tumbled into the city proper, like oil from a spout. The castle's foundations rumbled odiously with every heavy, metallic *plunk*.

'Evacuation is impractical. To minimize casualties, I believe we should attempt to lure Bahamut out of the city,' Milda proposed.

Luth glimpsed the shrinking ground below and clutched the dragon's corded neck, trying not to estimate how many feet he would drop before turning into a strawberry-blonde puddle on the

sidewalk. He wasn't even afraid of heights, normally, but the circumstances were far from normal, and he had less control over his flight than he would've liked. "You're right, that's the best way. But how?"

'Let me try something. Hold on tight, child.'

That statement was a far call from allaying his fears, but Luth didn't dare shut his eyes when Milda slicked her wings back and dove into a sweeping charge, arrowing for the besieged keep. Bahamut was busy pock-marking its every corner—it would take even the world's greatest dragon some time to demolish the mountain-castle. In seconds they were close enough to count the ridges of his wings and the imbricated spines on the eidolon's back, and that was when Luth noticed the florescent flicker between Milda's widening jaws.

"Whoa, what are you—ahh!"

Luth was knocked off his seat, scratching to keep saddled as Milda arced her neck and belched a streak of liquid-hot silver at her target. Bahamut took the plasma blast to the shoulder and pedaled backwards a few strokes, startled more than anything. Luth couldn't even see a scorch-mark on his slate-armored hide. The eidolon hovered for a

moment on lazily beating wings, regarding its assailant with a quizzical hiss, and then with an inflated, nasty one.

Milda spun on her tail and darted away, and Bahamut took to the chase. Luth couldn't say he liked this plan very much. As bold and swift as the silver dragon was, the eidolon was thrice the size and even faster. Luth watched over his shoulder in horror as the streamlined monster encroached, as unstoppable as a guided missile, even when Milda swung low, trying to use the metropolis itself to stall him. The buildings and spires that she wove around posed no obstacle at all—flagpoles, traffic signals and light poles alike bent to Bahamut's passage like reeds.

"He's gaining on us!" Luth realized, panic seeping in and petrifying his clutch on Milda's nape.

'He is too fast for us,' she admitted, gliding beneath another overpass. Bahamut zipped over it and bore down on them in the next heartbeat. There wasn't any room to breathe—Luth could've spit on him, if that would've been worth anything, but he was positive that not a sliver of him or Milda was going to escape those shredding claws.

Milda flew directly for the broad side of a building and pulled some desperate brakes, throwing her feet forward in time to catch its vertical face. The bricks crackled under the stopping force, but Milda stayed composed, and thanks to the insane inertia Luth was pinned to her back for a lucky second instead of dropping fourteen stories. Bahamut less gracefully followed suit, his face plunging through a sixteenth-story window and his whole body whipping to the side, brutally smashing the wall.

In one quick breath Milda recovered her pace, bounced back into the air and ducked through a back alley. Precious seconds were afforded while Bahamut extricated his horns from the window and its flowerbox, eventually ripping it all asunder.

“You think we lost him?” Luth wondered once the monster was out of sight, but before Milda could assure either way, Bahamut vaulted over the nearest billboard and fired at them vengefully, the neighborhood igniting in blazing gusts. With a high somersault Milda pulled out of the brimstone and fell behind the eidolon, armed with another energy bolt. Before it could tear from her teeth Bahamut spun about, his tail connecting with the silver dragon’s gut and sending her reeling.

Milda's winded cry eclipsed Luth's as they teetered through the air and landed oafishly on a net of iron crossbars. The Burmecian finally lost his grip, the impact tossing him several yards to the other side of what gradually came into focus as a skeletal, sky-scraping construction. There was a patchwork steel floor, some empty pipes and ducts, a neglected crescent wrench and a lot of missing walls, the entire level devoid of anything else. Luth crawled to his hands and knees and peered over the side, where a muddy lot dotted with heavy machinery and portable sheds panned out far, far below.

He blinked and found his footing, and then Milda, who was struggling at the same. "Are you okay?" he shouted, that question first to mind—he'd wonder where Bahamut went once his vision quit spinning.

'I am fine,' she plainly said, and then an ominous, flapping shadow descended into Luth's narrow line of sight, answering his other question.

Milda picked herself up and about, meeting Bahamut face-to-face. Before Luth or even the eidolon could be surprised, she lunged at the Dragon King, teeth and claws anchoring in neck and chest.

Bahamut was dragged down and crammed against the overhang of a building across the street, and there was a sound Luth never thought he'd hear in his life and never wanted to hear again: Bahamut *screaming*, a choleric, godless shriek that would've made Ramuh's thunder shrink back.

When the eidolon finally pried off Milda's vise, blood fizzed from the crook of his throat, staining the silver dragon's resplendent feathers. The blood was soon her own; Bahamut repaid the wound with a vicious uppercut. Milda sailed down the street, a cloud of crimson-silver pillow-down in her wake. Luth bolted to the ledge she abandoned, striving for a better look, though he had no idea what to do—he never felt more helpless in his life, and he couldn't stand it.

A parked taxi broke Milda's fall, and while she shook off the cab's jagged pieces and sought her bearings Bahamut returned her favor, throwing himself full-throttle onto her vulnerable form. They wrestled over the street like mad dogs, leather folds and feather webs tearing and bleeding, until the chaos-wrecked street seemed to arrive at a standstill.

Luth let out a sigh for the respite, but once he had a clear view of Bahamut on top, he took his breath

back—and then he saw Bahamut's drooling clamp on the base of her skull, his arms staked over her wrists and his bladed hips rocking into hers, the smaller dragon writhing fruitlessly under the king's unyielding, virile girth. The grisly scene took Luth a moment to comprehend, and once he did, he wasn't sure if he was going to pass out or throw up.

That, of all things, was too much. He hadn't even known Milda five minutes, but that wasn't the point. She was a friend of Boss's, and was only trying to help; that meant something. It meant a lot more than a rutting tyrant-dragon could take away, even one that was wrecking his adopted city and everything he'd come to love and hate about it. Indignant rage bloomed up Luth's spine and riled his hackles, and the Dragon's Hair appeared in his hand without asking.

Bahamut was too preoccupied to notice him, so when the aspiring Dragon Knight touched the street in three steep, bounding strides, rushed up in a supernatural, arcane tempest and scratched the Dragon King with his lance, it was an unwelcome surprise, at the least. At the most—more than any Dragon Knight in the last century could claim—Luth had rented a savage gash in Bahamut's ribs, contributing to the swell of angry humors that now

bathed Milda. The belligerent dragon broke his hold to flail and snap at the interloper, and in that merciful moment Milda scraped away, rising on her tatters of wings.

Bahamut didn’t let her departure go unchecked. He lost interest in Luth and hunted her down, climbing high and fast despite his own wings looking the losing part of a battle with a paper-shredder. There was a wicked glare on the tip of his fangs, and Luth wished with everything he had that he could block the charged shot, or simply warn her, but the silver dragon was too far and too slow. Even when she curled to avoid it, the King of Dragon’s aim was true, piercing and rupturing with a spear of wraith-fire too hot to look at. A gruesome vestige of a dragon emerged from the flare, its wings a crumbling torrent of cinders and its belly like a burst watermelon.

“Milda!!” Luth wailed as Boss’s summoned beast flopped to the roadside like a fowl struck out of the sky. A lambent emerald pyre enveloped her falling form, and on impact she broke into a swarm of silver sparkles that dispersed in the wind, like dropping a jar of fireflies. He numbly watched his only remaining help dissipate into the aether whence she came, and a menacing eidolon rise in her place.

Some graffiti was tattooed throughout the peeling blue paint of the fire escape—uninspired, scrawling nonsense such as hearts and gang slogans, all drawn with keys, pens and other mundane sharp objects. It was nothing compared to the bombastic spray-painted murals on the outside walls, but the closest to interior decorating the dingy shaft was going to see. It was dank and dark, old rainwater pooled into cockroach baths over the stripped cement, and all the light was borrowed from outside.

He galloped after Maroon, too leery of the rusted handrail to try any stunts. “Believe me,” Boss griped to no one in particular (though he perversely hoped Althier could hear) on the way down yet another flight of stairs, “I’ve never said this before in my life, but now it’s official: I am *too old* for this!”

His target veered through a portal three more floors down. It was far from the ground, but nonetheless an annoying position; by the time Boss got there, Maroon would either be completely out of sight or lying in wait, ready with an advantage—or both. If Boss was lucky, he could just push him into a dead-end and finish everything handily, but luck was never straight with him.

It wasn’t anything he was expecting. The level was laid open, stubs of walls and doorframes cut along the floor like a half-planned maze. The outer walls were a wood-mottled, rat-nibbled cake, nests of cottony insulation piled throughout the exposed framework. Dusty windows squatted near the ceiling, spreading pallid daylight across the room like a disease. The only things standing in the shallow arena were a sparse forest of concrete supports and Maroon.

His back to Boss, he waited in an oblivious, indolent stance. From the way his shoulders gently heaved and his tail lazily dusted his heels, he looked winded but unperturbed—not in a hurry at all. He held his piece while Boss took stock of the austere room. It wasn’t made for living; it wasn’t made for anything. The whole project must’ve been abandoned years ago. It all seemed really… anticlimactic.

He wasn’t thirty paces away; he had to have heard Boss stomping in. Was he ignoring him? It was a weird tactic, at best. Boss approached with all caution; his daggers hadn’t left his hands the whole time. “Let’s talk.”

Maroon responded with a dry, tilted snort. “Ahahah. Why not? I’m all in favor of an alternative to senseless violence. Besides, the longer we talk, the more time Bahamut has to tear your city apart.”

“Why are you doing this? What is it you want?”

Maroon finally confronted him, turning a lofty mask forward. “We are the Red Angels. We want nothing less than Gaia itself—to overthrow its governments, dominate its people, level their cities. We will inherit this planet and forge our new empire in Terra’s name, just as our creator intended. Only then will Assimilation truly be fulfilled!”

The term grated against his psyche like a Qu’s tongue. “Are you crazy?! Do you know what Assimilation meant? Everything was going to be destroyed!”

“No!” he barked in high obstinacy. “Gaia would be destroyed. Gaians would be destroyed.”

“You’re going to kill all those innocent people—”

“Like those mob boss friends of yours? The ones that just slaughtered each other with guns, over drugs? No one is innocent! There’s no such thing. Gaians, Terrans—it’s only a matter of winners and losers. No valiant struggle of good against evil. No

heroes, no villains. I am merely here to bring it all back—the way it used to be, the way it was supposed to be, before you and your band of misfits threw everything off track. I'm going to raze this world to its foundations and rebuild it with fire and magic."

When the only comeback he received was gawking, Maroon chortled self-righteously, "Ahaha, what's wrong? Speechless in the face of my magnificent goal?"

Boss lowered his brow and reasserted his grip on his daggers, keeping them close to his sides. "No, just *horrified*. So that's all you are now? A terrorist?"

Maroon seemed to have contumelies prepared. "You must like that word, or you can't think of a better one. I must ask, how did it feel when you executed your last grandson? Or were you even man enough to do it yourself?"

Refusing to give in to taunts, he tucked down the knot in his chest and growled, "If you think a guilt trip is going to get me down, you've got your work cut out for you."

“Haha, so cold. I’m sorry to hear that. Mother knew, didn’t she? About you.”

“…Yeah,” he answered, flat and candid. “She was the only one.”

Maroon gave a clipped, exasperated laugh. “And you weren’t ever going to tell me, were you?”

“I was until you took off!” Boss said hotly in defense.

“You abandoned us first!”

“And you abandoned your mother! Is this how she brought you up? Is this what she wanted to see you become? A genocidal maniac?”

A nerve finally plucked, his face turned as ruddy as his hair as he thrashed the air and blustered, “Don’t you dare speak for her! You don’t know her! You don’t know what she wanted!”

“The hell I didn’t!” Realizing that a shouting match wasn’t going to help, he tested a softer voice, entreating, “Listen, Alfy—”

“*You can’t call me that*!”

Boss bit his tongue, stymied, as Maroon’s tirade tapered into a dull, cynical roar.

“You weren’t there! You were never there.” He threw up a panting shrug, his dignified countenance besmirched with long-lost bitterness that cracked his voice and wetly teemed in the nooks of his eyes. “Where were you, Father? Where were you when she was running flight schedules, and signing inventory, and staying up after hours at the office trying to run *your* stupid company and raise a teenage son by herself? Where were you when I was buying groceries, and cleaning the house, and doing the laundry after class every day so she wouldn’t come home to more work? Where were you the day I graduated fifth in my class? She was there! And where were you when she was lying in a hospital bed, dying from pneumonia?”

“Hey, where was I? Where were you?!” Boss returned, desperate to blame someone else for the trembling in his hands, even as that heavy-sick feeling seeped into his gut and filled his shoes with lead.

“I was there!” Maroon inveighed, faultlessly proud. “I *came back* to tell her goodbye. Even *you* could have done that.”

Boss was rendered silent, his shamed gaze struck to the floor. The rusty man stewed in his

accomplishment without pleasure, for a change. He only said, thickly, bluntly, “But you didn’t.”

A long minute passed, more dust varnishing the condemned lot while the windows rattled with an exoteric conflict. Suddenly remembering his place, Boss lifted his chin and met Maroon with a hardened glare. He wasn’t going to let this boil over some petty personal matter; the entire world was at stake.

“So what do you want? What’s your point? *I was a bad father.* A lousy husband. Is that what you wanna hear? I’m a fuckin’ deadbeat. You don’t have to take it out on the whole damn planet!”

Maroon’s mad smile was drearier for getting back to business, though his ardor wasn’t slaked in the slightest. “No… I don’t want you to do anything. I don’t want you to do anything but die. I want you to die watching me succeed where you betrayed and failed us. Then I will live forever with the stars, shining down on the glory of our people.”

It was then that Boss realized exactly what made talking to his son so nauseating: Althier was a lost world’s fulfilled antithesis—the very person Boss would’ve become if he had said yes to Garland—the very person Boss hated inside himself.

He braced one foot forward and steadied his daggers, something resolved in their mutual anguish —in their same ruined family. “Geez. You know what? I am sorry. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to beat this crap out of you before it got out of hand.”

“Hrmph.” Maroon raised a callous hand, tendrils of black fire wafting off his fingertips like ghastly claws. “You can no longer patronize me. Your time of playing Gaia’s little hero is over.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve heard all this crap before. I’m going to give the same answer I did the first time!”

Boss rushed in, ready to end it all.

Bahamut flexed his neck and frog-like limbs and stamped on Milda’s ashes, crowing triumphantly. Luth was livid with terror and outrage at once, his ankles quaking and his eyes boring an almost tangible hate through the back of the dragon’s skull.

Somehow sensing the latent ire aimed his way, Bahamut stopped and fixed his faceless stare on the Burmecian. It wasn’t until fire licked across the eidolon’s lips that Luth realized what he was asking for.

“Oh, shit.” His heels squeaked against a manhole cover as Luth remembered his sanity, turned tail and fled the way he came, in frantic flea-jumps back up the scaffolds. He tried to cut across the breezy husk of the thirteenth floor, but there was no evading the tidal flame that engulfed the building next. Luth jumped out in time to escape the burn, but the shockwave knocked his heels over his head. The world twisted off its axis and then crunched flat, Luth waking up in a dazed heap of pain.

Jolting upright, he first noticed the sloped rooftop he nearly broke his back on, then the polearm that had rolled into the hanging gutter, then the dislodged knapsack that had dumped its load all over the shingles, and finally the seething, serrated maw of the Dragon King, coming down to meet him. Luth flung himself towards his pack, groping for something—*anything* useful at all, and he almost couldn’t believe it when a little black revolver manifested in his mitt. He didn’t waste the second it took to remember how it came about; he rolled onto his back, pointed it dead ahead and pulled the trigger.

The shot was laughably perfect. Bahamut recoiled with a gargling gasp, a bloody, puslike bubble spewing from his left eye like the yolk of a

stillborn egg. Luth recognized the chance he bought and scurried to reclaim his other weapon while the eidolon pawed at his wretched socket. The Dragon's Hair danced free with Luth across the roof and over another alley.

He skipped along a fretful mile, ramparts, bridges, balconies, flimsy shingles and chimneys mere hurdles to the training Dragon Knight. He made some deceptive headway, half-reaching city limits and escaping into the outbounds, though ultimately, Luth only succeeded in infuriating the beast, whose revenge was thorough and hellish. The last building Luth touched was incinerated first, the blast of heat and splinters throwing his tiptoed balance and kicking him into a leap.

He jumped higher than he ever remembered—or the ground fell farther away than he ever remembered. It was slow-motion, twisting blurs of fire and charcoal, a smoky demon god, the forever-grasping sky and unattainable earth, and he was falling upside-down into the heavens, gravity forsaking him. His chest was seized with an adrenaline-bite, the air curdled in his lungs and his mind lost clarity, everything fracturing into grains of thought and feeling and memory.

It was hard to keep in mind that these were still allies—that these newborn monsters were people on my side.

Bahamut was breathing down his neck and the city was burning to the ground and the great castle clock stopped ticking and Luth's heart stopped beating and he recalled feelings he never had—cozy passion in a luxurious studio apartment, a carnal flicker under moonlit watchtowers—and things he never saw, pages of expired, bittersweet lives unraveling behind his eyelids.

Vivi looked the part of a true demon, lightning and fire pouring from each hand like liquid death. He became a walking arsenal of magic that not even devils would dabble in, much less a small child.

Eiko looked like a cherub sent from Odin's court, her horn a hot white beacon and her tiny, sentimental wings suddenly lifelike.

Amarant turned a treacherous black, sucking the light out of the room—a nightmare spawned from the shadowy corners where day turned to night, except his claws were real and terrible.

Quina devoured senselessly, foaming at the mouth like some rabid beast whose bite nothing

survived—nor remained.

Steiner glowed and howled like the mighty, righteous paladin crossing Valhalla's threshold, and Dagger was a fledgling valkyrie, clad in the ghostly armor of the eidolons.

The world wiped out. Luth was hanging by the clouds, waiting for the white everything to seep under his skin and dissolve him into nothing, just like the Genesis Building, and Milda, and all things the eidolons touched—just like in the stories.

Zidane was a comet streak, feral pink, shimmering blue, fur and claws, and his energy was so brilliant that "magic" could not describe it, much less contain it. The wrath he wove out of nothing was more than a match for Kuja's spells, and it was only then that there was no doubt; he was a being from Another World.

And when I Tranced…

Instead, she took his hand, keeping him whole with one simple, warm grasp. He tried to narrow down her features, but they were too dreamlike, hiding behind a ruby dragoon's helm. There was only a crystal-flash, an impression too fickle to capture with the eyes, though the image burned into

his mind forever, like a photograph. Her face was drawn smooth and her hair was ivory-silk and her eyes were coy aquamarine and her voice was a little like Milda's and a little like Julia's and a little like his mother's, strong as a soldier and delicate as a lily.

"Looks like you could use some help."

He remembered accepting with no words, and as he drank the precious nectar his ancestor offered, his spirit grew inflamed with scales, claws and wings of his own. His core ached and burned and lusted for desperate serpent's breath, and suddenly his heady roar was not his own. He realized, above and beyond himself, that he was no longer Luthane Crescent; he was the Knight of Dragons, the one to bear the banner of the old gods. His coat was transcendent mythril tempered with valiant souls, his crest was blazing amber, and his lances were as brilliant and numerous as the hairs on Reis's divine mane.

As far as Bahamut witnessed, his flitting prey jumped straight into the sky and vanished. He jerked to a stop on his frayed sails and skimmed the smoking wreckage, basking in the gusty slag that peppered the streets. Stumped but not daunted, the dragon turned his remaining eye heavenward, only

in time to catch the hailstorm of spears. There was a hundred if there was one, and suddenly the eidolon's vicinity was a god-cursed pincushion, the air itself screaming with every searing streak.

Bahamut's shriek didn't stop the holy bolt that stapled the hinge of his right wing to the stony cathedral behind him, nor the spear that fastened his left shoulder to the same. His legs bucked and his tail flogged the bricks in conniptions, shaking the wall like a brittle stack of gelatin. As he worked his pierced joints free, he craned his neck to behold Lindblum's descending champion, a dragon-sent lancer haloed in ghost-glow. Above all was his weapon, a giant golden rod barbed with flame, and when it came down the knight followed, swift and terrible.

The dragon couldn't even work up a spurt of counter-fire before the blade was jammed through the roof of his mouth like a can opener. It stopped for nothing, tearing through his gullet, cleaving his chest and erupting with a splash of cinder-gore through the base of his tail. Bahamut's revenge amounted to nothing more than a mortal howl as every tooth, horn, claw and scale disintegrated into wispy eidolon-lymph. Each particle of the failing summon was its own feather-garnet, lighter than

dandelion seeds and darker than blood—and even these were swallowed in the very conflagration he started.

With one last, grievous cry, the King of Dragons rejoined the realm of specters, and the whole city sighed.

Maroon slung a *Thunder* off his sleeve, and Boss's blades bounced off the electric whiplash, tossing mercurial confetti across the room. The Red Angel followed with his other hand, and Boss cut through the attack just the same, shucking off arcs of star-glitter. Boss hopped off his other foot and charged in close, vying to choke off the magic attacks, but Maroon wasn't finished. He caught the blonde with a handful of fire that knocked him clean off his feet and back to where he started, tumbling and smoking.

He wiped his eyes, smoothed down the singed corners of his shirt, yelped and sprang out of the way of a bolt of foxfire. It chased Boss in jittery loops, hissing and coiling like a snake conjured from hell's cold blue flames. The blonde bobbed and skipped around it like jump rope, from tips of toes to

hands and knees, every pliable limb wheeling out of its path.

Maroon stood back and watched with an entertained glint as his father skittered in circles like a cat with its tail on fire. Boss finally pinned the apparition with his heel, stifled it and faced the other man again, ruffled and supremely unamused. The blonde's glower melted into an apprehensive cringe when he realized that the diversion had a purpose, one that was charging up like a bonfire around Maroon's violet-licked form.

The *Flare* crashed over Boss like a tsunami, roaring and surging in a whirlpool of heat, sound and color that rocked off the red end of the spectrum and caved into itself like a dying sun. It consumed everything in its sphere of fire, sucking the air out of the room, turning the floor into jet glass and gutting the wood and foam rafters, leaving behind simmering pipe-stumps.

Maroon looked into the subsiding spell for a trace of his target, and held his breath when he found Boss crouched in the epicenter, arms folded protectively over his head and an iridescent, soft-white eggshell warding hazards off its caster. He

wasn’t any worse than his attire, frayed and burnt on the edges but generally in one piece.

The Red Angel clucked at the *Shell*, presuming to be impressed. “White magic? Interesting. Where did you learn that?”

Boss carefully drew himself back up, blinking hard as his eyes readjusted to the pale light. “A little bird taught me.”

Maroon bared another will-o’-wisp fist. “Old dogs really can learn new tricks, then?”

Daggers spun forward, ready. “Oh, I still have plenty up my sleeve.”

Thundara, *Blizzara*. They tore through the room, one hunting the other through sheets of ice and storm-fire. *Fira*. Maroon nimbly pranced ahead, weaving black magic behind him like a streamer. The wiry ceiling clattered and the walls corroded under the magic gales, plaster and plywood catching half-doused fire, breaking apart and decking the hall with wet cinders.

Boss plowed through the hurricane, every wave burning hot and cold through his skin and into his bones. He dodged what he could and gritted his teeth through the rest, keeping up a fighting sprint.

Maroon was more athletic than he gave credit; the man was one step behind every pillar, just barely avoiding Boss's sight. More than once a dagger clashed futilely with concrete, and Boss cursed and doubled back, ducking under another lightning strike.

Persistence became his best weapon, and gradually the spells grew less furious and less frequent. Boss faked a step around another support, and Maroon fell gasping into his path. Nothing silenced a spell like a punch to the gut, and Boss shut that *Aero* up through Maroon's ribs, taking him on a trip to the floor.

The magician coughed vacuously and rolled onto his back, searching for wind, while Boss bent over him, one knee balanced on his sternum and both blades crossed like scissors over his throat.

"You want to live forever?" Boss lectured, now that he had his son in his place, "You don't know what you're talking about. You don't have a damn clue."

Maroon cracked a grin, breathless and sardonic. "Heh. So eager to kill your only son? Well, what should I expect from the man who murdered his own brother?"

Boss set his jaw and delicately pressed the daggers into the tender flesh, drawing two fine hairs of blood. Maroon sucked in a timorous breath and stilled his tongue. “You sure do take after him—but even *he* got the picture, in the end. Looks like you still have a lot to learn.”

Maroon began to whisper, his will tireless and ever-defiant, “You can kill me, but you’ll never win… our creator’s plan will prevail, with or without me! Ah-a-ssimilation…”

The words were snuffed out as Boss lent the rest of his weight to his knee. The blonde was so angry he sputtering. “You—you—you know your creator is a pile of bones at the bottom of another really big fucking pile of bones, right? He doesn’t give a shit about your cracked-out idea of Assimilation. I watched him die. I watched it all burn. And I even felt sorry for… Argh!”

He lifted Maroon by the collar, jumped off and rashly threw him aside in one fluid stroke. “I wanted to help you! I didn’t want to believe you’d all lost your fucking minds! Go.”

Maroon peeled himself up, fingering the quiet leak across his neck. He passed Boss a tentative look, his pride wounded and his features strangely

blank as he lay half-prone on the slick, ashen cement. He didn't dare move until Boss broke the silence, his cry echoing harshly through the ruins. "Go! You're a fucking idiot. You, Pevy, all of you—you're all a bunch of stupid bastards." He then backed off, refusing to look at him, and finished glumly, "But I can't kill you. Just go home. Get out of here. You're no son of mine. I never want to see you on this continent again."

Beaten and drained, the magician shifted wearily, trying to stand. "Very well…" he imparted, his voice subdued. A furtive hand fumbled with his bag while he found his footing. "As you wish…" He narrowed a malignant glance over his shoulder, his voice turning to acid. "…Your Majesty!"

A dark blur flew from his hand and stung Boss in the shoulder. "Agh!" He stumbled, surprised, and plucked the projectile out. It was a dart, feather-tipped and plain, though as Boss examined it his vision started to warp and fade. "What…?"

He knew what it was, too late. The dart slipped from his dull fingers as he recalled the mind-burning lull of sleep, and his legs buckled unbidden beneath him. The world turned green and grey and felt gross,

and Boss could see Maroon stalking towards him through the paralyzing haze.

“Ah, hah ha… I see my chimera venom has run you through again. You keep falling for the same old tricks. You’re as *stupid* as you are old and pitiful, like a dumb, senile dog.”

“Enough with the goddamn dog metaphors…” Boss rasped, relying on wavering hands and knees for support. His head was too heavy—his fingers slackened around the numb grip of his daggers—sweat frosted his neck and brow—he was so tired…

“I can’t; they’re too fitting, especially when you just *don’t get it*. This isn’t about Garland and the old Terra. This is going to be a new world! This is the end of your story, and with you, Gaia’s chapter will be over. It will be our turn. I will burn down the old, decrepit cities and build over them, with the power of the very monsters these Gaians owe their salvation to.” Maroon stooped by his ear to boast, “Isn’t it beautifully ironic? And your death will be the first of an avalanche—you should feel honored! You’re going to be at the conception of a whole new world, and you can’t even lift a finger to do anything about it.”

Boss shuddered. He wasn’t going to sit and listen to this. He drew a hefty breath and managed to lift one blade towards Maroon, but it was a pathetic feat. Maroon kicked it away, watching it skid into the nearest wall. He then took Boss’s thick blonde mop in one hand and the remaining dagger in the other, requiting his injured wrist by twisting Boss’s. The blonde gave a strangled croak as his weapon was wrenched loose, and then Maroon had it turned down on him.

“Seems that like true vermin, the only way to kill you is to cut off your head.” He jerked Boss’s head up, exposing his heat-blistered, venom-sapped neck, and raised a chopping blow, his eyes gleaming with malicious victory.

It was so dark now, Boss couldn’t tell if his eyes were closed or not—it was just wheezing breath and the smell of smoke and a painful knot in his hair and Maroon’s singing spite, and it was tied into his right sneaker, waiting for a good shot—waiting for a monkey’s prehensile tail to yank it out and pass it to his limp hand.

“So, farewe—”

It was so sudden, the word stuck in his throat. All at once Boss *moved*, everything vital driving a metal

spit through Maroon's belt, and the magician dropped him and turned into himself, staring at the butterfly knife in bug-eyed shock.

"And you said mercy was my weakness," Boss grumbled raggedly as he clambered to his feet. His sallow, sweat-laced complexion made him look the worse part of undead, but his eyes yet glistened with life, real and potent. "That venom's only gonna work once—I'm immune now."

He was more-or-less bluffing; the poison was just as cripplingly noxious as before, but Boss was too sick of being tired to let it keep him down. He was going to take care of business first, everything else be damned. He forcefully took Maroon by the shoulders and drove him against a column, his *Cure* threading around the blade left in his gut. "Don't you go dying on me!" he snarled, and Maroon ineptly gaped in return, a coppery, mortal frothing in the back of his throat. "I'm not finished yet."

There was a dissonant warble outside and hell burned dimly all around them and Maroon was going to vomit his own blood except Boss had him by the gullet, clamping it shut with one cold iron hand as he told him, hard and fast and full of tears, "I loved your mother! I loved her like you'll never

know. And I’m a damn fool, but I still love you, too. I always did.”

And as he spoke he *changed*, a strange luster possessing him, crawling up his legs and playing with his raiment, pink and threadbare blue and then fuzzy fur—his pupils became feral slits and his teeth beamed, white and sharp. “But I love Gaia more than anything. She was there for me first, and she’ll be there for me last. And if you’re going to make me choose between you and her, I’m sorry, but it’s gonna be her. As long as she’s here, so are my friends. Even when they die—even when I move on, they’re with her. They live on in *her* memory, and I’ll be *damned* if I’m going to let you destroy everything they’ve worked so hard to protect!”

Maroon shrank in his hold, now purple-pale and too terrified to even shut his eyes, and how he wished he had run away while he had the chance.

“What do you think, Alfy? Where do eidolons come from? Where are they born? In secret gardens in the sky? In the rotting graveyards of dead planets? In a man’s dreams? In the stars?”

The metamorphosis didn’t stop, nor did Boss’s grip relent, even when there wasn’t a Genome anymore; there was a were-monster wreathed in

white feathers, an angelic sasquatch with a demon's girth, a towering beast, a silver dragon cast in white gold. It had a terrible, husky growl, stinking of something more pure than hate, nothing like Boss or Maroon or anything *human*, but the words it uttered were clearly and definitely *him*, through and through.

"The answer is all of them—a little truth in every one. I'm going to show you the secret of eternal life. Pay close attention."

It pulled Maroon off the ground, leveling his nose with a great, pearl-toothed snout, and the creature grinned—wild, high and crazy, always and forever the King of Thieves.

"I don't know how else to say this… but this is gonna hurt me a lot more than it hurts you."

It was misting when Luth came around, as if the gentle downpour could atone for so many scorched homes and lives. He was spread on his back on an elevated crosswalk, his weapon inches too far from his torpid reach. He was woozy and numb—the power was fading, his strength like wings of wax

and his thoughts mired in the lukewarm afterbirth of a trance.

The world was turning monotone-bleary, the sirens down the street drowning in the grey noise between his ears, when Luth had another vision, perhaps: a great white dragon, landing gingerly nearby. Its pearly glow and beastly shape waned in his half-lidded stupor—he turned his head to the side and it was gone. Through the damp corners of his eyes he watched the flashing red-yellow lights congregating in the distance, relief flooding him as emergency teams finally found their bearings.

Luth grinned like a dope, not caring one bit if he was left on the street in the rain forever. Everything felt… fine.

Pattering feet approached, and a murky-blonde shadow fell across him. “Lu!” the shade spoke like Boss, and when Luth mustered a blink, there he was. The familiar Genome leaned over him, frizzled with dew and matted with blood, but otherwise intact. Distress was etched around his eyes. “Lu! Are you okay? Geez, you look like hell. I can’t believe I sent you out there like that; I’m such a jackass. Lu! Holy shit, look at me, tell me you’re okay.”

Did he look that bad? Luth could've returned the sentiment, but he didn't know how to say it. "I saw her, sir…" It was so hard to speak, it felt like he was drowning.

Boss screwed up his brow, nonplussed. "What?"

"She was beautiful, just like you said…"

Luth could faintly discern Boss's efforts to prop him up. "Uh, Lu? I think you got knocked on the head there."

Maybe. He didn't mind. He didn't mind enough to mind. He liked the cool mist settling on his whiskers, the scent of quenching fires and the feel of Boss's warm arms around his back. He followed the draining euphoria into peaceful darkness, murmuring as his eyes closed, "It wasn't a grand dragon, but I think it'll do."

"Lu?" was the last thing he heard—a little thread of panic. "Lu!"

A/N: I hope the wait was worth it.

Is Luth going to be okay? What happened to Althier? And Julia? What's Boss going to do? Is

there going to be a Happily Ever After?

Stay tuned for the final chapter: Exeunt.

17. Exeunt

17. Exeunt

Hey, Lu.

“Ow! Geez, watch it, that kinda stings.”

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t see you there. Those burns look bad. You should get them looked at.”

I’m sorry it had to end like this.

“Nah, I’m fine, don’t worry about it. Say, Julia, thanks for all your help.”

“It’s no problem. I just wish there was more I could do, you know? I can’t even get to work; the streets are swamped, and the police shut down all air traffic.”

“Yeah, I know. Hey, speaking of, I need to head out, but can you do me one more big favor?”

But it’s for the best, you know? You’ll be better off. You’ll see.

“Sure. Where are you going?”

“Nosy, aren’t we?”

“What can I say? It’s my job.”

“Heh. Yeah, you’re… Listen, take care of Lu. I think he’ll be fine; he’s just exhausted, but…”

“Of course. Like I said, it’s no problem. When will you be back?”

I never know how to say this, but…

“…Thanks.”

Thanks, and…

“What?…Hey!”

See you when I see you.

He slept lifelessly, the singing downpour not even evoking homesick dreams. The skies still wept over Lindblum a day later, when he woke to the staccato of raindrops on the glass doors of his balcony.

The bed was foamy-soft. The starched pillow was cool to his ears. Luth recognized his ceiling first, with its off-white tiles dyed grey in the hourless daylight. He studied the swirling grain of the stucco for a minute, his eyes making trick sparrows and gargants out of nothing. Current events occurred to

him gradually, the whole week rewinding and then mapping out again: they went to Gatortown, they "talked" to Pevy, they made a series of illicit phone calls, they ate pizza on a deathwatch, they got drunk in Treno, they worked in the office, they were going to the Festival…

He started in a broken spasm, remembering hard, but his body refused the knee-jerk. Luth fell back to his pillow with a rough groan, railing against the onslaught of humming, sticky pain. His stomach seethed, his right shoulder was stiff and his calves and arms were riddled with lacerations he couldn't even guess-at the time, he was too busy trying to keep his tail out of the frying pan to notice a few scratches, and Milda took the brunt of the attack, besides.

He recalled the last of her with a compassionate pang. *'Oh, Milda… I'm sorry.'*

Passing over the bad memory, he sat up, mindful of the sore spots. While waiting for the vertigo to fade (he felt drunk with too much sleep), a curious glance roved his body, discovering tracks of bandages around a simple white shirt and canvas shorts. Someone had tied him up pretty comfortably,

and taken care to clean him, too; the garments were fresh, and he could smell minty soap on his fur.

It didn’t feel like the day after a disaster. His room was still there. Yesterday’s dirty clothes were lobbed into a neat mess in the corner, half a glass of juice was left atop the minibar and his clock read a sane number; the lights hadn’t even gone out. The Dragon’s Hair stood in the corner behind the armchair, its fanned blades interlaced with the wings of his old halberd.

Trophy wounds aside, the only souvenirs from the ill-fated festival rested in a modest stack on the nightstand: a dusty book, a large garnet, a shard of lime quartz and a folded piece of paper. Luth couldn’t believe it. He lurched towards the table, ignoring the stitching pain, and took up the leather-bound keepsake. Anxious fingers scrambled across the pages, dabbling in the old, delicate handwriting. It was all the same-it was all back, just when he was sure he’d lost it forever. Luth closed the diary to his chest and puffed gratefully at the ceiling. “Thank the gods…”

Tap-tap. Luth spun a baffled glance to the door. Who was knocking? Boss never knocked-not anymore, anyway. Before he could ask, the door

cracked open and a delicate, mousy nose peered inside.

“Luth?”

Luth recognized the voice instantly, and his tongue uncoiled with a squeak. “M-Miss Knickoff?”

Julia entered and flashed an encouraged smile. “You’re finally up! You’ve been asleep all day. I was starting to really worry.”

“I, you, uh,” Luth babbled, at a loss. “What are you doing here?”

She self-consciously brushed some glossy strands of silver behind her ear. “Oh, my apologies. Of course you don’t remember; you’ve been unconscious since the attack. My van was stranded when I found you and Boss. He let me stay the night here. Before he left, he asked me to take care of you.”

Luth relaxed a notch at the mention of Boss. “He did?”

Julia nodded and sat across from Luth on the bed. His gaze jerked away from hers as he felt the blood rise to his cheeks. She smelled like powdered

buttercups, and even in the cloudy gloom her eyes glowed like candles, just like that first night…

“Hey, Luth,” her soothing tone cut into his shy reminiscing, “I saw what you did out there. You were really brave.”

Was he? He honestly couldn’t remember much of what happened after Milda fell. His voice teetered over the throbbing in his ears as he tried to account for himself. “Ah, no, I-it wasn’t anything. I was roped into it, really…”

“Hehe. Give yourself some credit! You looked like a real Dragon Knight.” Her hand reached to the middle of the bed, culling his attention, and Luth swallowed dryly and chanced another look. Her expression was soft, smiling, and intent with… admiration? For *him*? “It was incredible.”

His heart stopped-he couldn’t hear himself anymore. The way she was staring-was he imagining it or was she…? “I…”

A harsh electronic jingle jarred the moment, and reality took over. Luth waited on the interruption while Julia reached to the pocket phone on her blue sequin belt and flipped it over one knee. The device emitted a coarse South Gate accent.

“Julia! Cripes, you okay, lass?”

“Ruben!” she exclaimed, practically shouting into the phone’s tiny camera panel. “I’m so glad to hear from you! Where is everyone? Are you okay?”

“Oh yeah, everyone’s at the station. We’ll live another day, looks like. You won’t believe what it’s been like up here. The city’s a bloody mess. I’m up to my arse in calls. Everybody’s got a piece of the story. Hey, where are Chuck and Randy?”

“They’re with me. The van’s okay, but all the streets are blocked; we had to stay with a friend last night.”

“Tch, well, glad you’re in one piece. You won’t believe what Howie scooped up from HQ, though. Says the police got a hold’a that Red Angel guy, the leader.”

Julia’s outburst was fringed with joy, while Luth blanched behind her. “You’re kidding! So they took him in?”

“Oh yeah, in a body bag. *Decapitated*. Craziest thing, his body turned up right at their front door, plain as day in the middle of everythin’. Checked his bag and there they were: the three Jewels. And what else? His bloomin’ *head*. Grisly, eh?”

“That’s awful. Do you think he was responsible for the attack?”

“I’d put all my money on it. And it keeps gettin’ better. He’s a Genome, of all the bloody things. Like those monkeys don’t have a bad enough rap already. Them Nativist pricks are gonna blow their stacks over this one, I guarantee it. But I gotta wonder who did ’im in-I mean, you don’t put your own bloody head in a duffel bag. Oh, and they got an ID on ’im, too: Maroon Tribal. Ever heard of ’im?”

“No,” Julia admitted, not registering the throttled sound from Luth’s direction. “But I’m so relieved to hear that-I mean, it’s terrible, but I hope it means this is all over.”

“Ah, hell, me too. I mean, bad news is good news for our business, but y’can have too much of a good thing, y’know?”

“Ruben…” she chided the insensitive remark.

“Ahaha, I’m just kiddin’! Gotta keep your sense o’humor at times like these, eh? Hey, speakin’ of work, did you get any good footage?”

“Absolutely,” she replied, assuming some professional pride as she stood and began to walk around the room. “I followed it all the way to the

end-lost some in the middle, but there's still plenty for the floor to work with."

Luth donned a sour smirk, noting her disregard for his order to get out of harm's way. She kept pacing, oblivious.

"Excellent, beautiful, love. I knew you'd come through for us. Get it down to the station as soon as you can, eh?"

"Of course. I'm a little tied up here, but I'll head over as soon as the coast is clear. Take care over there, okay?"

"Oh yeah, you know me. Gotta go, good luck, lass."

"Good luck, Ruben." She clapped the phone off and turned back to Luth, somewhat meliorated. "Can you believe it? They think they caught the Red Angels! Well, the leader. But that's such good news."

"I heard…" Luth said weakly, finding it hard to share her exuberance. Suddenly Boss's absence worried him more. "Did you say Boss left? Did he say where he was going?"

She gave a stymied frown. “No, I didn’t manage to squeeze it out of him.” She then snapped her fingers towards the bundle on the nightstand. “Oh, but he did want me to make sure you read that note.”

“Note?” Luth found the card, which had fallen aside when he picked up the diary. Its message was penciled in Boss’s slanted handwriting on a torn square of lined paper, like some grade-schooler’s dog-smitten homework. The first word had been crudely erased, but then written over so diligently that Luth couldn’t make out what it once was-just the tail of a ‘y’.

Good luck, Lu. You’ve been a real pal. I never knew how to thank you for everything you’ve done for me. Believe me, true friends are the rarest, greatest treasure of all. Money won’t buy you an ounce of happiness. It’s something you have to find in others.

I leave everything to you, now. I trust you to do what’s best-and I mean for YOU, not for me or Ultima Express or your family honor or whatever. A friend once showed me that being true to yourself is the most important thing you can learn.

As for me? It’s time to disappear again. This time for good. I’ve cast out my father, my brother, and

now my son. I've spent too long watching everyone I ever cared about pass on without me. It's about time I caught up with them. I have a date with the god of death where the dead tree grows. (But life is never that simple, or easy.)

Live long (haha) and be happy, Lu. Freya would've been proud of you.

P.S: I know how these things tend to look, so don't worry. Tell them Bahamut ate me-nobody can spit at that. And don't worry about Milda, she's fine, right where I left her. As for the company, if any bastards try to take advantage of you, go ask Sheryl to open File B. She'll know what you're talking about.

He was on his feet before he'd even finished. "Oh gods."

"What?" Julia pried, alight with renewed concern.

Luth was rushing out the door, book and note still caught up in his arms, not sparing his good sense and recovery another second. "I have to go-I have to find him!"

Julia chased him down the hall and into the elevator, where she finally got a grip on his panic.

He was excessively jamming the down button, as if that would hasten their descent, when Julia grabbed his shoulder and yanked him away. “Luth, calm down! What does it say?”

Luth sagged against the wall with a despairing sigh. “I have to find him, before it’s too late. I think he’s going to… oh, gods.” He smothered his face with a heavy hand, unable to cope with the thought, much less utter it.

Julia picked the note out of his shaky grip and skimmed over it. She puckered her brow, nonplussed. “A goodbye letter? What is he talking about? This barely makes sense. It almost sounds like…” Disbelief rippled over her features. “Oh my God, he wouldn’t. Would he?”

Luth returned a hollow, guilty look. “…He’s mentioned it.”

“What?” That admission raised the woman’s umbrage. “You mean you saw this coming? And you didn’t do anything?”

Cornered, Luth gulped, straining to defend himself. “It-it wasn’t that simple!”

“If you see someone-your friend! If my friend was talking about doing something like that, I’d seek

help!”

“How’re you supposed to help a suicidal immortal?” he blurted, and at Julia’s aghast, ‘*What*?’ he instantly regretted it. He beat his knuckles against his head and grumbled, “Oh gods, I’ve said too much.”

The elevator luckily opened just then. As Luth dove into the shipping bedlam, more for a way out than a way in, Julia hollered after him, “Hey, wait! Do you even know where you’re going?”

The Burmecian spun in circles and then stopped, confounded. “No!” he wailed.

Julia took his side again, her temper graciously subsiding. “Then let’s try asking around. Maybe someone saw him leave.”

They scoured the central corridor for a helpful face, but no one could pinpoint the elusive Genome. The halls were rife with frustrated pilots, crewmen and security personnel. The café was full of loungers with nowhere else to go. Sheryl’s desk was abandoned. Finally, a familiar face emerged, and Luth could’ve exulted until he recognized Berto’s sloping mug. He cursed his luck while trying it, anyway. “Berto! Listen, I need some help.”

The tapir was picking his nose with a lemon lollipop, but he paused to greet the Burmecian pair with a dopey wave, leaving the sucker lodged in his left nostril. Julia supplied a bemused look, yet refrained from comment.

“Um, have you seen Boss? Like, recently?”

Berto swayed in place, as if hypnotized by the question, but then his eyes rolled forward and found Luth again. “Yeah, I saws Boss.”

“You did? When?”

“Las’night.”

“Did you see where he went?”

“’m left,” he murmured.

Luth grimaced. Getting information from Berto was an intuitive exercise. “Gone? Like, on an airship?”

“No, walked.”

“Into town?”

He nodded, the lollipop bobbing in his snout like a buoy.

“Did he say where he was going?”

“No… he was actin’ funny.”

“Funny? Like, what, joking?”

“No… quiet. Sad.”

The Burmecians exchanged foreboding glances. At Luth’s distant, distraught look, Julia spoke for him. “Thank you, Berto.” She led him away, and Berto shrugged, plucked the sucker free, sniffed it and stuck it in his mouth.

Julia sat him (and the diary) down at a little table beside the café. “Oh gods, we’re going to lose him…” he lowed miserably, collapsing over the book like a house of cards.

“No we’re not,” Julia reproached him with confidence. “Just relax! Think. Did he ever mention going some place?”

“No! He never said anything! He just…” Luth lifted his head with a belated memory. ‘I overheard him talking to Miss Sheryl, just the other day. He said he was planning to leave the company. But he didn’t tell me. He didn’t say anything. And now this!’ He clawed pathetically at his unkempt bangs, trying to repress the biggest migraine ever. “Oh…”

Julia laid the rogue paper flush on the countertop. “Com’on, let’s look at the evidence together. He must’ve left a clue in this note.” A pearly pink claw picked out the line, “‘*I have a date with the god of death where the dead tree grows.*’ What do you think he means?”

“I don’t know… um, well…” He strung up a lackluster history lecture. “The dwarves used to call the Iifa Tree the ‘Tree of Life,’ but it actually harvested the souls of the dead through its roots. It’s also where the Necromancer was defeated, sorta.”

Julia nodded brightly. “See? You’re thinking! And that makes perfect sense.” She rose and hitched his arm, about to take off. “Let’s try—”

Luth anchored her by the wrist. “No, wait. The Iifa Tree is gone. I mean, it’s not the same-not undead, like it was.”

She shrugged at his objection and stressed, “It’s pretty close, isn’t it? More importantly, it’s a *lead*, and the only one we have. Isn’t it worth following?”

“Yes, but…” He looked into a private horizon, where his thoughts mingled in the sunset of someone else’s memories. “…*Life is never that simple.* It’s just bothering me. He’s been trying to do

this for… for forever! But it’s never worked. What makes him so sure he’ll be successful this time? What does he know now that he didn’t before?”

She tried to break his distracted rambling, unease gaining over impatience. “Trying to do what? What are you talking about? Luth, this is getting really weird.”

He snapped back with a tired, cynical laugh. “Haha! You have no idea.” He traced the bindings of the neglected book with his fingers, wondering… “It’s crazy, but I feel like the answer has been right in front of me this whole time.”

“I just wonder sometimes: which god did I piss off to deserve this?”

“Apparently the god of death, sir.”

“What did you just say?”

“I only meant the Great Necromancer, the one you beat-no disrespect, sir.”

“…Huh. Heh. Heheh. Hahaha. Ha!”

“What’s funny, sir?”

“Ah, Lu. You’re a genius.”

Luth hadn’t given it much thought at the time, but… “The god of death…?” Where had he heard something like that before?

Once again, the answer was waiting at his fingertips, and as the pages fell open it all came together like a train wreck.

“Check it out, rookie. It’s Dark Matter.”

With Kuja’s help and the power of the Desert Star, Brahne summoned Odin, the great eidolon of death, to wreak doom on the surviving Cleyrans.

“Dark Matter? What’s it do?”

“Oh, it’s somethin’.”

Dagger held it to her bosom and prayed, just like she did to all the other eidolon stones, and it throbbed in her hands like a second heart, black and sinister. She awoke from her commune, eyes full of pain and sorrow more poignant than before, and declared, “Odin. It’s Odin, the Death God.”

“…This’ll do.”

The diary shut with a conclusive *whomp* as Luth shot out of his seat. “The god of death!”

Julia blinked. “What?”

“I think…” He kept Julia’s hand and took the lead, hope revitalizing him. “I want to check somewhere else first. We definitely need a ship. Com’on!”

They tried the indoor docks, though their progress was stunted at every move towards an airship. The Regent’s agents had seized the airways, and not even the second hand of the man who owned the port of entry could get clearance. Julia was helping Luth brood over their lack of options when a gruff, shrill honk accosted them.

“Hey, rat-boy!”

They turned together, Luth perking up curiously at the familiar moogle. “Mister Arpy?”

Arpy bumbled through the air on frenetic little wings, his puffy body being tugged in too many directions. Gravity more than anything managed an upright landing at their feet. “What the shit, there’s two of you,” he acknowledged the other Burmecian before turning on Luth. “Hey! Where’s your significant other?”

Luth gave a mortified squawk while Julia explained, “Boss Ultima left a while ago. We were just looking for him.”

“Fuck!” flew out of Arpy’s chipmunk mouth, and bystanders tilted their brows and shuffled away. “I was gonna ask him for a smoke. I need one like my last three girls have needed to douche. None of you can spot me a stick, can ya?”

Luth blinked, Julia gaped breathlessly and Arpy waved the two down after a half-second’s hesitation. “Ah, get bent. Have you seen what’s going on downstairs? It’s a total fuckfest-and not the fun kind. No bitches, no hos, no nuthin’! Just a bunch of pigeons runnin’ around trying to tear up the joint. Worst looting I’ve seen since that drunk trucker parked on a conductor and knocked out the power to Smithy Street-Lee Jackets and Arrow Coats raining from the sky like the fuckin’ designer clothes lottery. And where the fuck is Theresa? I don’t even like that bitch, but she owes me big.” He granted Julia a second look. “Say, don’t I know you from somewhere, sweetcheeks?”

She caught her composure and introduced herself, one hand to her breast. “Julia. Maybe you’ve seen me on Channel 8?”

“Channel 8? Oh hell, you’re that Knickoff broad-I saw you on the tube yesterday. Fuck! I’ve been running my fat gob in front of a reporter. You didn’t

hear nuthin', you hear me?" Tuning her out, he continued, 'Anyway rat-boy, it's all gone to balls. I need Ultima to come down and punch Armond's fucking nose in. I can't find Griffin-big blue lout's skipped town-and I can't do it.' He held up his paws, a pair of infantile nubs on tapering stumps. "Do you see these things? I couldn't out-box a squirrel fetus. Now Ultima's got those huge clown mitts, like a gorilla-hey!" He stopped short as Luth abruptly marched off. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to find him!" Luth asserted, heading straight for the stairs that dropped to the docking floor and the officer stationed at the top with a barring strand of rope.

"But they won't let us through!" Julia tried to catch him, though he wouldn't even look back. "I don't care!"

Luth honed in on the blockade agent, prepared to hear the same speech again. He'd tried this route just a minute ago. If persistence was worth anything, though… "I have to get down there! I need an airship!"

The agent lowered the brim of his hat over darkening eyes. "Sir, I've said already, no one is allowed—"

Luth stepped in close, about to bluster the cap clean off his head. “You’re not listening to me! Someone’s life is in danger!”

A strict hand pushed him back. “You can go and call the authorities—”

“No! There’s no time!” Luth shook his head and arms fiercely, carelessly flicking the hat off its perch. It tumbled to the floor, and while the agent looked fazed and balding, Luth stamped and growled at thin air, “Ugh, he’s right, the police are useless.”

The agent laid a hand on his sidearm, becoming the sort to use force. “Am I going to have to have you restrained, sir?”

Arpy squeezed into the fold before Luth could make real trouble. “What the fuzzy nuts are you peons doing? Outta my way, I’ll fix this!” He settled between the opposing men and stuck a puny, commanding claw up at the agent. “Hey! You remember me?”

He ignored Arpy, addressing Luth over the interruption, “Your and your moogle please step back, before I have to remove you from the premises.”

"*His* moogle?" Arpy flared with such force that everyone in the bay held their breath to listen. "You don't know who I am, do you? Well, what about Heidi?"

The agent blinked in recoil, noticeably struck by the name. Arpy proceeded to unload on him, "Oh yeah, that's the look. You remember now, don't you, motherfucker? Well remember this, too: I know where you work, and I know where you play, and when you're playing with her, you're fucking with me. So unless you want everyone else in this damn flying monkey cage to remember it, too, you'll get your shit together and give this rat a V.I.P pass, if you know what I mean. He's a made man, and if you don't remember what *that* means, you're gonna be a dead man."

The shocked expression tapered into an indignant one. "Are you *threatening*—"

Arpy heedlessly jumped onto the guard rail overlooking the pit of the hangar and started broadcasting across the bay, as loud and clear as possible to the two dozen people on standby crews, "Agent Curtis Vladance pulls up to the corner of 12th and Appens every Friday night in a red 1985

Traveller and asks her to call him *Harry H. Balls* before giving it up the—”

He didn’t have to finish the sentence. Five minutes later, Luth was leading their party-now a stray pilot richer-up the ladder to the boarding deck of the *Good Graces*. He was lucky to find the small outland craft in the jammed hangar, and then room to maneuver it out of the docks. He only hoped his good fortune would hold.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Julia could only remark on Arpy’s unique negotiating skills. “Who exactly *is* that moogle?”

Luth helped her clear the top rung with one hand and scratched his nose with the other. “You might say he’s a… friend of the company,” he hedged.

The pilot, a meek young man named Tim who didn’t have a clue why he was so rudely singled out, much less for what, gave a trepid salute. “Where are we headed, sir?”

“Lake Cleyra,” Luth affirmed.

Julia cocked her head at him, puzzled. “Lake Cleyra? Why?”

Luth passed her an earnest, bolstering glance. “Just trust me.” Faced with his conviction she nodded, ready to follow.

Arpy, just catching up after lifting a pack of cigarettes from Agent Vladance’s back pocket, flitted over their heads and into the ship’s cabin, grumbling, “Fuck yes, whatever, who cares let’s go. Move it, chimps!”

It didn’t really hit him until he looked at the skyline: the city was hurt. Badly.

Luth gazed upon at the metropolis now alien to him, trying in vain to trace the original structures out of the crumbs of bricks and steel. It looked like the playground of a capricious tornado, whole city blocks wiped out while neighboring ones were left alone. The rain fell in listless waves over sporadic fires, and some corners were left to smolder while shorthanded fire brigades pumped their sweat and tears into whatever stood a chance. Black and white smoke entwined to fill the scorched spaces, lest it all appear just… empty, instead of ravaged. Everything burned slowly. Bahamut wanted his handiwork to last.

How many homes were ruined? How many people died? The *Good Graces* was virtually the only ship in the sky (Agent Vladance gave them a special beacon that registered their craft to the police as an “emergency vehicle”), and the lack of usual traffic made it all the more unsettling. It was almost impossible to comprehend that he was still in Lindblum, yet a look at Grand Castle assured everything: it was still there. The city would stand. Luth would feel better for that, except he was still missing something-that someone to say it for him-that everything would be okay.

“Hey, are you okay?” Julia appeared, leaving the dry cabin to join him outside. Luth had opted to watch their takeoff from the ship’s bow, even as the weather whipped him soggy. She leaned on the rail next to him, her free hand clenching a scarf over her head. “You look really stressed-out. Maybe you should come inside and sit down.”

“Oh…” Luth responded distantly. “I’ll be okay, I just… I feel so lost without him.”

She nudged his shoulder affably. “Hehe, don’t worry, we’ll find your boyfriend.”

He nearly slipped on the waxed planks of the deck, whirling defensively. “Bo-I, what? No, no no

no, we're not, I didn't, I mean that one time wasn't __"

She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Ahaha, Luth, relax. I was kidding! Although," she added flippantly, "I am not responsible for anything that gets published in the *Lindblum Star*."

"Oh." He settled on the rail again, allayed until he thought too hard on the joke. "W-Why, what have they been saying?"

She smiled in wonder and patted his arm. "You are so… innocent," she put it kindly. "I really wonder what he sees in you."

Luth grimaced and turned his glance down at the rapidly shrinking city, trying to save face. "Um, Miss Knickoff…"

"I thought I told you to call me Julia." She narrowed an inquisitive look at him. "Say, why didn't you ever call me? I thought we had a nice time that night, at the Laughy Shacky, remember?"

Call her? Luth thought back. He didn't forget getting her number, or even the sunny yellow paper it written on, but it took a moment to recall its resting place. The answer pushed in like a swift tide, just as the East River panned into view below. It was

in his other bag, the one Griffin had chucked to a watery end right behind their Red Angel prisoner, without his consent. Of course, Maroon had bugged it, so it was the prudent thing to do, but on the other hand Griffin could have dumped Luth's things out of it first-or at least warned him.

If Griffin truly bore a resemblance to the Flaming Amarant, Luth would never know what his ancestor saw in him. But the lost note didn't matter; that wasn't the predominant reason he never called her back, anyway. "It's been a bad time…" he started the excuse, but his true feelings butted in, acrid and accusing. "You know, you could have told me you're a reporter."

"What?" She reared back as if slapped, more hurt from the surprise than anything. "That's it? That's why you're acting so cold to me?"

Luth dipped his shoulders with a frustrated retch. The scene felt too familiar, like standing on a swampy trail in the middle of the night, a Genome's easygoing shrug telling him, 'So what?' as if his trust was a simple matter of accepting a lie. "Yes, that's the big deal! I was… trusting you, and you deceived me. You made a fool out of me, and I don't appreciate that. I'm tired of everyone treating me

like a child. I don’t need to be protected from the truth,” he explained sulkily.

Julia set her hands on her hips with a sardonic whoop. “Oho! Listen to you. You never asked, you know. I would have gladly told you where I work. But if I told you from the start that I work for Channel 8, would you have taken me seriously? Or let me ask: would you have been as relaxed and willing to speak with me as you were when you didn’t know?”

“So, what, that was part of your plan to lure me in?” he snipped, the words so bitter he nearly gagged on them.

She threw out her arms, exasperated. “Lure you into *what*? You’re being ridiculous, Luthane Crescent. I was just trying to get to know you, nothing more. I thought you were cute, and sweet. I guess I was wrong.” She tossed the tail of her scarf over her shoulder and stormed off.

The parting tugged brutally on his conscience, and before he knew better he was sprinting to catch up. “Wait! Wait, please.”

She paused and dealt him a warning glare, waiting on his move. A gust picked the scarf off her

ears, and loose threads of hair flirted with her leering brow and slender jaw. Luth could've kicked himself if he weren't awestruck by how tall and, and *beautiful* she looked when angry.

"L-Look," his voice cracked, embarrassing him further, and he tried not to wring his hands and look completely cowed as he appealed, 'Listen, I'm not… I'm sorry. This isn't me. I mean, I'm not like that-it's just, I'm really high-strung right now, about Boss and-I mean, you're right, I'm making a big deal out of nothing because it's-women like you never talk to me, you know-I mean, um, you're a… you're great,' he gave up. "You're really great, and I'm screwing this up, huh?"

Julia stepped in, closing the windy gap between them, and suddenly her visage was kind and forgiving again, and her fingers smooth on his collar. "Luth, stop. I have an idea. Let's start over. What do you say?"

Luth swallowed. Up close, he could see the flecks of ruby and silver set in her keen amber eyes. "I… like that idea."

She stepped back and offered a cordial hand and smile. "Hi, I'm Julia Knickoff. I work for Channel 8; I'm a reporter. You can call me Julia."

Playing along, he stood at attention and accepted the handshake. “Hi, I’m Luthane Crescent. I’m not quite a Dragon Knight,” he attempted, but abashed chuckles broke his flair. With a lopsided smile, he then decided, “You can call me Lu.”

Luth bided the rest of the flight under the cozy wooden roof of the pilot house, perusing the last of his great-grandmother’s notes while the clouds outside the bridge’s wide glass panes vacillated between rainfall and nightfall. Homely electric boxes hanging from the ceiling resembled old oil lanterns, casting gilded light over the creaking floor. Luth reclined across a cushiony bench near the back door, the book propped between his knees. Tim stuck to the helm, striving to avoid Arpy’s casual vitriol on the starboard side.

The moogle eventually tired of telling him to, “quit holding the wheel like you’re waltzing with a big queer guy,” bobbed to the cedar balustrade marking off the captain’s tier and lit a cigarette (he procured a nut-shaped lighter from the ruff of his fur coat), flicking the ashes at Luth’s feet. “That’s Freya Crescent’s diary, huh? What’s she like? Does she talk about all that crazy Mist War stuff?”

Luth nodded, buried in the nostalgia. “Yeah, and the seven other heroes, too. She was amazing. They were all amazing.” He sighed. “It makes me wonder if there’s something about that time period that we’ve lost-something really valuable that they had and we just… don’t appreciate anymore.”

The moogle sniffed disdainfully. “You sound like my grandfather, kid. ‘Course, he talked a lot of smack on the ’good old days’ too, hypocritical old coot. You know what he used to tell me when I was growin’ up? Said the Mist War was just the eidolons curb-stomping everyone ’til Queen Garnet stepped in and told everyone to shut the fuck up. All that stuff with aliens and the Wizard and the Necromancer is the legend-just crazy shit those war heroes made up afterwards.”

Luth bent forward, grievously ruffled. If he’d thought to bring his halberd, it would sit up with him. “That’s not true!”

“Hey, don’t pull my wings out for it; just what he said! I don’t give a big steamin’ crap, either way,” Arpy muttered around a long drag on his cigarette.

“Er, there’s no smoking in the cabin,” Tim erringly spoke up. The moogle blew white vapors

over his shoulder like a surly mistodon. “Shut your fuck up, Captain Queer.”

Tim nervously complied while Julia emerged from the washroom below deck, her sandals plunking up the narrow metal steps. She swept a look around the bridge, as if to make sure it was still in one piece, and strolled to one of the windows. “I still can’t believe everything that’s happened,” she murmured towards the red-rimmed mountains, and then started. “Oh no, I haven’t called my mother! She must be worried sick. Excuse me.”

Luth watched her bustle down the stairs with tiny phone in hand, and sighed again. It was easier not to think about what has happened, even though thinking about the future wasn’t uplifting, either. He returned to the diary, hoping something in *her* past could possibly shed more light on *him*-anything that could help at all. Sporadic pecking through the entries finally unearthed a clue, far towards the end of the book, too fitting and too late.

After dinner we sat in the library and had one of our little “talks.” He likes to confide funny, odd things to me every time I visit the castle. I don’t know why I’m always selected to listen to stories about putting oglops in Steiner’s pillowcase or

impersonating a castle guard (not even a Pluto Knight, but rather one of General Beatrix's subordinates. He said the uniform was 'fairly comfortable, though not very forgiving in the crotch area,' and I was appropriately disgusted.) Apparently I'm "easier to talk to than Dagger about some things." Perhaps it's a compliment-it's hard to tell with him. I can relate to the sentiment, though; there are things I tell Zidane that would never cross my mind around Fratley.

Tonight was different, though. Once he was sure the others weren't around to overhear, he started to tell me, "I've been having a weird dream."

I asked him to elaborate, of course, and of course he began to digress-it's so frustrating to get a straight answer out of him, I swear. It didn't seem like he was playing around this time, though. There was an anxious tick in his eye that put me out of ease. "I mean, you know how it's been a long time, y'know? Since the war and… Iifa and all that, right? We're all getting old-I'd say you were getting grey hairs if they weren't already white!"

I won't lie: I'm in my sixties, my knees creak terribly and it's not so easy to be a soldier mother anymore-why, I'm a grandmother now, perish the

thought. But I won't be hearing any of that from him- I thumped him upside the head, the cheeky monkey. But then he said, "It's just, isn't it kinda funny that you guys are getting old and rickety and I'm, um… not?"

It wasn't that I hadn't noticed. I think we all have. It was that pink zaghnol in the room we just didn't talk about. Dagger managed to wear crow's feet and grey streaks with as much poise and dignity as ever- perhaps even more, but he's still… sixteen. Never looked (or acted) a day older. We don't know if it's something Garland or the Iifa Tree did, or something else entirely. His sister once said his soul is "special," and we're all starting to see how, but no one knows why. All the other Genomes I've met have aged well enough-why doesn't Zidane show the slightest sign?

Then he finally told me about his dream, and how it's been recurring for years and years, ever since that final battle. The Necromancer would appear to him, which would automatically make a nightmare in my books, but then it's what the monster says that rattles one to the bone. He said he's had the dream so often now, he knows the words by heart:

“There is no tall mountain, no deep ocean, no lethal venom, no noble sacrifice and no hope that will redeem you to me. You will never cross the river Styx. You will never pass the gates of Hades. You will never see the light of Heaven. You will never feel the embrace of the earth. Nothing will claim your mortal shell-not even the wild beasts shall see you fit to devour. You will be as the rocks that turn to dust, to wander the hills until they are laid flat, and come the end of time you will sit on my doorstep and wait for an invitation that will never come. You will always hunger, always thirst, always lust and always bleed, but you will never, ever rest.

“And then you will finally wish the Zero World had come to be, as if you never were.”

Then I knew what that strange look in his eye meant: he was terrified. He was afraid he couldn’t die. “It’s ironic, right?” he said and laughed, yet it looked as though he were crying. “I get to have what Kuja wanted, except I don’t want it any more than he didn’t want to die.”

I couldn’t say it at the time, but I’m afraid for him, too.

It was an aching while before Luth could pull his eyes off that page. He numbly closed the diary and

stared at the floor, instead. "…It's a curse."

Arpy barely overheard. "What?"

Luth shook his head, still talking at the scratched backside of the book. "He was right. If I had only finished this sooner, I would have figured it out myself."

"*What*?" Arpy repeated, in lieu of a string of expletives on how he was riding with some "crazy crackas with all screws loose."

Luth set his jaw with a grim frown. "…He's scared."

The skies had cleared the way for a purple sunset, sunflower-yellow withering into violet petals over a bed of looming black hills. The desert rippled grey and blue in the rising shadows like a frozen sea, and the *Good Graces* picked a landing on a clean patch of sand. Before the engines even stopped turning, Luth was making for the ladder, ready to take off on his own.

Julia followed close behind. "You're going out there by yourself? It could be dangerous. Let me go with you."

One foot over the side, Luth hesitated and then passed her a resolved glance. “No, I… I have to take care of this myself.” Julia threw down her arms and inflated with an objection, but before it could spill out Luth leaned close. ‘Listen, please do me a favor while I’m gone.’ He pressed Freya’s diary against her, forcing her to catch it. “Hold on to this. I’m coming back for it.”

Taken aback by the book dropped in her arms, Julia resigned to his instincts and stood aside, holding the keepsake over her heart. “You’d better. Be careful.”

Long ago, the desert beyond Burmecia’s borders was vast and harsh, beating back intruders with gritty gales and monsters that shot out of the dunes. The people of the Mist declared it a veritable “No Man’s Land” on every map and chart, and the only ones brave enough to trespass it were the ones who eventually settled its giant mystic tree, Cleyra.

The whole landscape changed once Cleyra was demolished. The winds grew placid, the beasts turned to dust, and inch by inch the desert shrank, encroached on all sides by wild brambles and dewy

weeds. There was nothing left to Luth's generation but a small, quiet, featureless country with a water-filled crater in its center. Evidently, the legendary tree grew upon a deep spring that welled into an oasis once the roots were burned out.

A skeleton of its predecessor sprung in Cleyra's place, a giant tent of branches woven from the smattering of trees on the fringes of the lake. Luth galloped towards the sanctuary, the only landmark for miles. He knew why Julia thought it might be dangerous; he'd heard more than a history book's worth about Lake Cleyra. There were tales of poltergeists, the bitter, moping spirits of settlers wiped out by Odin's burning pike. Adventurous teens liked to camp on the shore and pretend to be spooked-and worse, there lurked people who liked to prey on adventurous teens, but there was no one in sight tonight-no cars, trailers or parked aircraft besides his own. The attack on Lindblum might have discouraged sight-seeing.

The only thing that jumped out at Luth was a large, flailing bird bursting from the brush and trotting off into the desert-a chocobo, he recognized, white as snow. It was gone before he could remark on it, and Luth shook off the apparition, found a

break in the copse and ducked inside the reticulated tree.

It was much more… grand than it appeared from outside. The *Good Graces* and many more could be docked beneath the natural dome. In the moonlight, the moss on the welded timbers shimmered like red stars in a milky blue sky, granting the lake an otherworldly mirror image. Soft sand diffused into pearly silt that sloped gracefully into the untouched water.

And there he was, crouched on the rim of the glassy abyss, tail waving languidly through the crisscrossed shadows. Luth swallowed the soupy throbbing in his gullet and padded closer, his toes molding to the cool sand like quiet little cat paws. He stopped just short of his reflection, the other man small and still to his right. There was something in his hands that Luth couldn't see without kneeling, but he wasn't so bold-it didn't feel right. The balmy air reeked of strange familiarity-calm, almost… content, like another day at the office.

Luth didn't want to startle him, though that felt impossible; he *knew* that Boss knew he was there, too quiet and not ready.

He just rolled with it. “You should have gone to the Iifa Tree, sir. It would have been more fitting.”

Boss barely turned, acknowledging him with a veiled glance. His hair was burnt shaggy in spots, interrupting the soft blonde and vanilla streaks-Luth thought he saw more white than usual, though it could’ve been a trick of the moons. “Yeah, I know. But I couldn’t make up my mind if I really wanted you to find me or not.”

“Oh. What about now?”

“…Still undecided.” He leaned forward and dipped his hands in the water, setting loose his captured token: a lotus blossom. It drifted delicately away.

“I don’t like getting flowers,” he didn’t lament it. “For gifts or whatever, I mean. It’s like getting something beautiful and precious that’s going to wither and die slowly in your hands no matter what you do. I always feel sorry for them. They didn’t deserve to be plucked out of the ground where they belong and stuck in a jar next to some apology card, waiting to die. They didn’t do… anything.”

His small, mellow tone was broken with a snort. “Heh. I never used to think like that. Maybe I was

less crazy then. But I wanted to look at something beautiful one more time before… heh. You know, no matter how many times you try it, it's still hard to work up the nerve to take your own life."

"Sir, no…" Luth begged, the breath scratching his throat.

Boss sat back on his hands, shrugging blithely. "Nah, I'm not going back to Iifa. Been there, done that, got too many scars."

"Huh?"

He twisted an eyebrow Luth's way. "What did you think I really did all those years when I wasn't with the company, before I met Mery? Retired to a little island, grew turnips? Herded yans? I went to sleep."

"Sleep?"

"Yeah. Iifa's always taken me in. I just crawled in so deep no one would find me and… and nothing. I did absolutely nothing."

"You just lied there?"

"Just lied there."

"For *years*?"

Boss nodded, staring complacently over the lake.

“How could you possibly? I thought you said you don’t like sitting in one place for too long.”

“It’s easier than you think, when you have nothing better to do.”

Luth couldn’t speak on that. He just couldn’t picture it. Instead, he compliantly took a seat when Boss patted the sand next to him and said, “Hell, I’m not in a hurry. Sit with me for a bit, Lu.”

Once Luth got comfortable, the Genome folded his arms behind his head and reclined on the bank, looking up into Cleyra’s patchwork canopy. He was oddly underdressed; Luth was used to seeing him without shoes, but his wrists weren’t wrapped either, and he wore a baggy, open shirt that bared his marred front-whole strips of skin looked scorched.

Luth flinched for staring, though Boss didn’t seem to notice. “You don’t happen to have a bite to eat with you, do ya? Like a bagel or somethin’?”

“Um, you’re hungry, sir?”

“Starvin’. I thought ahead about everything except that, heh.”

Luth smirked at the ridiculous request. “Sorry, I didn’t pack a picnic basket.”

Boss cracked a grin. “Haha, was that sarcastic?”

“Um, sorry sir,” Luth bashfully retracted the remark.

“Hey, wha’d I tell you? Don’t ever apologize. That was a good one-that was cute. You hold on to that. Don’t be afraid of hurting someone’s feelings-just speak your mind. A sense of humor is one of the best things to have in this world.”

“Oh.” Luth kept reaching for something to say, but he was ever at a loss. He realized he was staring again, and the first crazy thing tumbled out of his mouth, barely an excuse. “If it makes you feel better, sir, I don’t think you look pudgy at all.”

“Huh?” Boss looked suitably baffled, even after he recalled Sheryl’s little dig. ‘Oh, uh, that’s… thanks, I guess.’ He lit up with a stray thought. “Say, you ever made sand angels?”

“‘Sand angels’?” Luth echoed, perplexed.

“Yeah, it’s like snow angels, only with sand.” He demonstrated, sweeping his arms and legs through

the grit until a crude imprint was left on the beach. “Com’on, try it.”

Luth blinked, failed at a rebuff and gave in, spreading himself on the beach and flapping his limbs just like a floundering-well, angel. “…This feels really silly.”

“Heh, it’s supposed to.” He carefully sat up and inspected the artwork. “Hey, not bad! Though yours kinda has claws.”

Luth made a sour noise and stopped thrashing, opting to simply soak in the scenery. “This sand is really soft.…This place is beautiful,” he reverently commented.

“It is. I hope they don’t mow it all down and pave over it, like everything else.”

“The Burmecian government protects it, I think. Parliament made it a landmark.”

“Well. That’s encouraging. There’s hope for this planet, yet.”

For an unspoken while they shared the view, watching moonspores sprinkle from the treetops like diamond dust. Everything looked like a dream. Luth could’ve fallen asleep, if he didn’t keep in mind the

reason he came to this deserted place, and the woman waiting for him back in civilization. His thoughts kept turning around ghosts and eidolons and angels until he remembered…

“You know something strange, sir? After fighting Bahamut, when I passed out, I had a dream about a white dragon.”

“Milda?”

“No, no, it was a different one. Pure white. I wonder what the priests back home would say about that.”

“They say dreams are supposed to show your deepest fears and desires.…I wonder what it’s supposed to mean when you don’t dream of anything.”

“Everyone dreams,” Luth answered, that one truth easy to him. He couldn’t even remember where he picked it up. “It’s what makes us human.”

“I don’t,” Boss said surely, sullenly. “I used to. I don’t have dreams anymore. Sometimes I wonder if I ever sleep, or if this is the dream.”

Luth held his tongue, his childlike faith boggled by that abstraction. Boss scratched the back of his

neck, fidgeting with something he'd been meaning to say. "Listen, um, about yesterday… You have no idea how sorry I am. I just threw you into the line of fire without even thinking. It's not like me and Milda, y'know? We'll be okay no matter what, but you're… We could've lost you. And it would've been my fault."

"Oh, sir…" He sat up, eager to assure him otherwise. "It's okay. I wanted to help."

Boss petted his shoulder with a wan smile. "I know you did, rookie. You're always such a good sport. And you did good! Julia told me you saved the whole town-she even got it on film, heh. I'm really proud of you. I just…" He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, racked with guilt.

Luth shook his head and insisted, "Don't be sorry, sir. Never apologize, remember?"

He huffed at his knees, and then leaned back into chuckles. "Ah, hahah, that's right. You got me."

"Sir…" Luth knew he had to get to the point, before he lost it. "What's it going to take to get you to come back with me?"

Boss looked sincerely intrigued. "Did you really go to all this trouble to come to my rescue?"

“Of course. Wouldn’t you do the same for me?”

“Heh, absolutely. That’s… kinda why I have to leave you.”

“What?” Luth didn’t understand at all.

“Just saving you the trouble, Lu. Everyone leaves me sooner or later.”

“I won’t, sir. I won’t. I swear it.”

“You plan to live forever?”

Luth understood *that*, despite his best wishes. Boss shook his head, as reasonable as ever. “It’s okay. I don’t want to ruin the rest of your life, anyway. That’s all that’ll happen if you stick around me.”

That statement sounded so wrong it hurt. “I beg to differ, sir. You’ve taught me so much…”

“Damnit Lu,” he gently griped, ‘You’re so disagreeable sometimes.’ He sniffed, his voice growing distant. “Heh, you remind me of… you remind me of him sometimes. He was such an honest little guy…”

“Him?”

Boss jumped tracks, a strange, ambitious tone taking over. “You’re not going to try to stop me now, are you? Not now that I’ve finally figured it out.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said it yourself: I pissed off a god of death. All I can do now is appeal to a different one.” He hummed distractedly. “I wonder if Mr. Nothing would think this proves him right.”

“But sir, how exactly do you plan to use the Dark Matter? You’re not a summoner…”

Boss wagged a finger at him. “Ahah, figured out that much, did’ja? I knew I picked a sharp rookie. But hell, Lu, you should know what it takes to call an eidolon by now. All you need is a rock, a little magic and a prayer-and maybe, if they feel like it, they’ll listen.”

“Like Milda? And Bahamut?”

“Yep, just like that.”

“If that’s all it is, then what were the summoners?”

“They knew the eidolons better than anyone. They were the first to speak to them, but it’s more than that. They could hear the planet itself-they had

a connection to Gaia. It's hard to explain, but there's a big difference between calling an eidolon and being a summoner. Big difference."

"So then…" Luth put the pieces together, "If you really wanted to… you could summon Odin yourself?"

"That's the plan. Anyway, it's time to wake up." He swung to his feet. "Today-tonight is a good night."

Luth stood too, scrambling for purchase on thinning ground, desperately clinging to what he didn't understand.

Boss's gaze roamed the spectral lake while his musings stood back, detached from everything. "You know what the hardest word to say is? Goodbye. You're right about me, those things you said that night. I've been running from that word. You, Althier, everyone… everyone's right about me. I'm just a hack. I just… I've been afraid of getting close to anyone, because they'll eventually leave me, so I… leave them first." He gave a hollow laugh, noting how absurd he sounded. "It's stupid, isn't it? I haven't seen my son in thirty years. I finally do, and I kill him. Would you forgive yourself?"

Luth didn’t know, and he dismayed to admit that he couldn’t know-couldn’t even imagine it. “Sir, I…” he trailed off, unable to think of what he was supposed to say.

“I can’t even say it was self-defense; it’s not like he could’ve done me in. Hell, it would’ve been a *favor*. I was just so angry, I didn’t understand.” He shut his eyes and clenched his fists, the memory rolling over him. ‘I can’t… I can’t take it anymore. I can’t live with myself. I hate who I am. That’s why I couldn’t… I didn’t even say goodbye to Mer. I couldn’t go back and face her.’ He cast a loathing look at his feet. “I’m a coward.”

Luth still couldn’t find the words, so he just reached out, took Boss off guard and held him, warm and trembling and too small to his chest. The Genome fell into it, too shocked to yelp or jerk away, and by the time he figured out he was in a hug it was too late.

“Um?” Boss said at length, bewildered.

“I hate to see you putting yourself down, sir,” Luth explained in little shaking breaths over his ear. “It doesn’t suit you.”

Boss melted a little, returning the gesture. “Aw, rookie… You’re makin’ me tear up.”

“I know you blame yourself for what happened to Althier, but this isn’t the answer to your problem. It’s just more running away. You have to try to forgive yourself, sir.”

He steeled against Luth, ready to push away. “No, Lu, I get it. That’s why this time is different. I know it’s really selfish, but I gotta do this.”

Luth only held on tighter, refusing to let go, even as his voice started cracking wetly. “You can’t leave, sir. You’re like a big brother to me.”

Boss cringed miserably, fingers digging into Luth’s shirt. “Oh, Lu, Louie. Don’t say that. Why you gotta do this to me? Why you gotta be like that…”

“Please don’t go,” he tried again, not relenting, and his cheeks were damp and he felt impeccably stupid and he didn’t *care*.

Boss finally got the upper hand, taking Luth’s arms and gingerly lifting them out of the way. He slipped free and wiped his nose, a suspicious sob breaking up his chuckles. “Ahahah, cut it out. Look at us. This isn’t very manly. People see us in the

middle of the woods like this, they'll think we're lovers or something. Not that I…" He sniffled and brushed his misty eyes. "Not that I ever gave a damn what people thought."

Luth choked a little, bereft, though the only complaint he could make was, "I never know what to think around you, sir."

"Haha, am I that annoying?"

"No, no sir. You're… you're the most incredible person I've ever met."

Boss shuffled on his toes, squirming out of eye contact. "Oh com'on, you've got to have a more interesting life than that." He caught himself, paused and started fishing through his pockets. "Oh hey, hey, I've got something for you."

"Wha?" he tried to ask when Boss slid in close, threading his arms around Luth's shoulder and tugging on his ear. "Ah!"

"Shh, hold still," he murmured intently, and Luth bit his lip and kept his ground. After a few awkward seconds Boss turned him loose. "Ta-dah! Like it?"

"What…?" Luth reached for the flap of his ear, feeling for his silver hoop, except it was gone-

replaced with something a little more weighted and… faceted?

“It’s for remembering. When Eiko gave it to me, she said a summoning stone is like a piece of an eidolon’s heart. If you wear it, you can feel it beating next to your own.”

“Oh…” He accepted what it was without even looking, though the more he realized what it meant, the harder it was to hold his mawkish thoughts at bay. “Sir, I…”

Boss didn’t wait for his gratitude. He reeled Luth in with one firm, gentle tug and planted a kiss on his nose. Luth felt warm then cold all over, frozen in place and rapt with the moment he couldn’t capture.

“Listen, ki-Lu. Luthane,” Boss leveled with him. ‘You’re a grown man. You know what you did back there with Bahamut? That was incredible. You saved the whole town-hell, you saved Gaia. You’re a hero. I don’t care what your old man says; you’re the best damn Dragon Knight he’ll ever see. I don’t have anything left to teach you.’ He retreated with a feeble shrug. “I just… I’m just tired. I want to get out of all this before I lose my mind completely. Before I end up hurting someone… anyone else.”

“No…”

He was smiling, but it didn’t look like all the fake ones meant to make Luth feel better; it looked like a fake one meant to make himself feel better-because if one of them didn’t laugh, both were going to cry. “I know it hurts, Lu, but sometimes the best thing you can do for someone you care about is let go. But hey, don’t worry, you can handle it on your own. You’re a good guy, and smart-you found me here, right? And I… I need to stop talking, before I ruin it.”

He spun on one heel and walked off, out onto the lake, and it took a heart-wrenched, delirious minute to realize that Boss was, impossibly, doing just that: walking *on* the lake, as if it were made of glass. Luth gawked at the feat, hardly believing his eyes, but just like Milda, the eidolons and white magic it was true, too.

The Genome paced the crystal waters with smooth, deliberate steps, pallid white plumes dusting off each step and filling the lake with faint, luminous ripples. He kept going, far over the pitch depths, looking up to the moons and rambling, “Do you believe in Heaven or Hell? I don’t think they’re gonna let me in up there.” Once he was as far from

the shore as he could get, he withdrew the dark artifact from his other pocket, grinning mischievously. “That’s okay; the fiery place always looked more interesting, anyway.”

Luth recognized Dark Matter’s ultraviolet glimmer, especially the way it gnawed on all the light around it, like a blight on the fabric of existence. Its inky aura looked like it was about to swallow Boss’s hand. He rolled the anti-stone between his palms, considering it, and that was when that thick, stabbing *dread* pushed Luth forward, plunging after him.

The water wouldn’t hold still for him. Luth staggered through splashes, soaked to his waist, and then hesitated on the deep’s threshold. He really wasn’t a good swimmer, he was ashamed to admit, and even if he was, it began to feel like it wouldn’t make a difference. Boss was too far out to reach with anything but his voice, loud and desperate, “Sir… sir!…Zidane!”

He startled and looked back one more time, a flicker of something surprised and genuine crossing his roguish countenance. Luth’s mind fluttered with insane propositions, most along the lines of rushing out, throwing Boss over his shoulder and spiriting

him away-but something, somewhere inside knew he had already lost. All that came out was an inept, “I… I’m glad I met you, sir,” and it would be a miracle if Boss even heard it.

Boss returned a glum smile, eyes as shallow-deep and black-blue as the waters he tread on, filled with every regret in the world and not taking back even one. He looked like a ghost already. “I’m glad I met you too, Lu.”

Luth watched what unfolded next, a hapless spectator. It didn’t start very differently from Milda’s summoning. The stone was offered to heavy air, suspended on arcane whispers, and then a jet, ethereal wind swooped in like a hellbound hawk and buffeted the pristine mirror of the lake, shattering the twin visage of the moons. Murky eidolon blood bloomed along the surface, tainting the stars and flowers, as a grave twilight dawned on the sanctuary. Luth could *smell* the gnashing wails of the things just beneath, aching to breach the virgin night, and he scrambled backwards out of the suddenly foul bath.

His entrance was subtle, like old, patient drowning. One obsidian hoof after the other emerged from the bottom, until a six-legged steed

festooned with steel plate ascended the invisible steps. Its eyes burned like coals, its mane and tail billowed like hot ash and its sinewy trunk was pieced together with macabre stitches. Its foreboding presence was only outmatched by its rider, morbid calamity personified. He wore an ugly bronze scowl beneath a bulky garland of thorns, and a jagged, snarling cape sprawled behind his heavy suit of armor. In his right hand he steadied a sword greater in length than them both, with a wicked curl to its tip. He was bigger and more menacing than any man Luth had ever seen, somehow more daunting than even the King of Dragons-this was an eidolon of another realm, and another power.

The oasis felt like a bubble in time, nature itself churning slowly outside, waiting to be let back in. Boss quietly bore the old god’s tempest, until the waves grew silent around his feet and Cleyra’s bane was standing square with him. And this was it, Luth knew-the seconds could stop altogether and he’d never forget the picture they made, the God of Death and the King of Thieves, staring each other up and down and neither too daring or too afraid. In the eerie blend of reds, blues and pale gold Luth saw a shadow of Oeilvert, and a broken Genome kneeling at a ruined altar before a pool of dead water and

living mist and praying to fractured masks for the mortal coil's release.

("When will I be done? When can I go home?") Not yet.

Odin spoke, his voice as deep, stony and endless as a mineshaft. "**Who calls me?**"

And Boss flatly answered to, "No one."

If his impudence ruffled Odin, there was no indication. "**What do you desire?**"

Again, unyielding, "Nothing."

Finally, testing, "**Are you afraid?**"

He bowed his head, hiding under shifting locks a grin that knew the answer before the question was even asked.

"Never."

It took merely one swing. The enormous blade didn't even have to reach. Luth thought he screamed, but he couldn't hear it-maybe he only felt it, swelling against his tongue but not escaping-or maybe it was just in his head, except all he could think was that for all the blood he'd seen in the past two weeks, sand angels didn't shed a drop. Not one.

And he cried or didn’t cry or thought he cried until the God of Death departed in a flurry of drumming ravens and the blushing sapphire color was restored to the lake, as if it had never felt a thing.

He cried until nothing was left but a tiny light, as blue and bright as the midday sky, which finally faded and winked out like an old neon bulb.

Not one drop.

18. Epilogue

Epilogue: To Far Away Times

Luth had mixed feelings about visiting the grave of Althier Ultima. The thought of his best friend buried under the name of his best friend's son-turned-mortal enemy was disconcerting, at best. Then Luth had to remember that it wasn't the first false tombstone Boss planted-just his last.

The funeral was insufferable, though at least it was outdoors, where the grass of the graveyard smelled damp and bitter and the sun was bright and hot enough to be distracting. It was a brief, sparse, shallow ceremony, where most who tried to mourn could not, but they went through the motions anyway. Gribbo rubbed his eyes; Sheryl blinked back stoic tears; Berto bawled like a broken toy. Pat was gone-he lost the bet, anyway. A man Luth had never seen before offered the eulogy. His suit was sharp and his words were smooth and glancing, like a perfect stranger. All were so shell-shocked, buried in rubble and fraught with the injured and dying that their hearts were empty to those already gone.

People crawled out of the fractured woodwork and drainpipes to wash the closed casket with hollow tears. “First Don, then Pevy and Leo, now this,” Gatortown lamented. Then they cried for all the homes and lives Bahamut smashed and scattered like ashes. “It’s a shame.” Sometimes it looked like crying merely for the sake of being sad. Because it was supposed to be sad. It was a shame.

They talked about him in the past tense, about how generous and outgoing and *young* he was, even at forty-seven-ain’t it a shame. Luth couldn’t speak; he didn’t know how to say that they had the wrong name, and the wrong man.

Faces blurred by him. He bumped into the Owlson family, and was glad to see them all alive and well, under the circumstances. Maria promised Luth a pot pie. He thought he saw Arpy, fleetingly, though the moogle was uncharacteristically quiet (he certainly helped himself to the mini sandwiches at the reception, though.) Julia was there, working. He couldn’t blame her for doing her job, but he resented the media attention regardless.

Armond had the gall to show up. “Ultima was a good colleague. I’m here to pay my respects.” Luth couldn’t articulate exactly why or how, but he was

furious, and he let it be known with a hard, malignant stare that made even the rising slumlord flinch away.

Sheryl was strangely contrite-and the only one besides Julia and Arpy who suspected something closer to the truth than “an accidental death.”

“I should have done something.”

Her fiancé obliviously consoled her. “It was no one’s fault. You can’t blame yourself. You couldn’t have done anything.”

A frighteningly bitter part of Luth wanted to snap, “Yes, you should’ve,” but his heart was immediately sorry for even thinking it; it wasn’t true at all. It was inevitable; it was something Boss *wanted*, and if Luth had learned anything about Boss, it was that he always got what he set his eyes on.

Later, Sheryl asked him furtively, amazing him with her perception, “It’s not Althier either, is it?” Luth could only shake his head. Then she asked the next thing, and in four hushed syllables he told her. If there was any other soul in the world that deserved to know, it was her.

“Tribal?” Her consort overheard the tail of it anyway. “Same as that terrorist leader?”

Luth could’ve been sick. Decades of obscurity, and then *that’s* how history was going to relate the name: to terrorists. No one would ever speak well of a Tribal again. If Maroon weren’t already dead, Luth would’ve strangled him himself-he settled for glaring daggers at Richard.

Sheryl just tipped one subtle eyebrow and pulled away. It was a fun fact-an exotic token-but in the end the name didn’t mean anything to her. Luth couldn’t and wouldn’t explain; she couldn’t and wouldn’t understand, anyway.

The King of Thieves was dead. Nobody even knew who he was.

By the end of the day, Luth hated funerals, too.

Julia took him to a pub afterwards, where they talked and drank to everything except their losses. It was late when Luth got back to his flat and noticed the old blood still on his floor. He didn’t have enough tears to wash it out.

The next week was too blurry and weird to feel like Luth belonged in it. He didn’t particularly want the attention, but thanks in no small way to Julia, Lindblum (and then the whole continent) wouldn’t forget his “selfless heroism,” as the news stories called it. There were people he’d never seen before and wouldn’t remember again asking him questions, but he couldn’t even recognize himself on the TV. A small Burmecian child stopped him in the street and asked for his autograph, and he was too amazed to refuse.

For a depressing while he considered going home. He missed it. Those days under his father’s roof, as sometimes cold as they were, felt humble and simple compared to what he faced now. As he learned, however, the saying was true: you can never go home again.

Not that he didn’t try. The King of Burmecia recognized his valor, but it was hard to shake his hand without “prick” flashing through his mind, almost visibly, like a banner. He bit his lip and said, ‘Nothing, Your Majesty,’ when prodded. His mother assured him that she was, “very proud,” while his father threatened to, “slap that disrespectful smirk clean off.” Luth politely shook his heels at him for farewell.

Out of the grungy ashes of Gatortown rose Don Weedle, better-known topside as Judge Welder, formerly of Leo's persuasion. Together with Armond (and many pulled strings), the old Undertown was reborn. "Greasy" Ricky shortly approached Luth, aiming for a partnership. "Business is bloody boomin'! Together we can branch out, make the world ours," he swore, though Luth vowed nothing to do with it.

The only thing left was the company. Luth took its reins easily-it felt like the natural thing to do. Boss was right; the business practically ran itself, and Sheryl helped him through the sticky parts. The only hard part was cleaning out Boss's room. The picture album was one item in particular Luth cherished, and he found a snapshot in the back that he was so enamored of that he eventually framed it: a greyed, polished group photograph, labeled quaintly on the back, like a signature, "*Alexandria, 1820. 20th Reunion*." He could point out his famous great-grandmother in the front row with a measure of pride.

Julia brought him lunch every day. Their courtship was funny and free of tangles, and Luth was a married man before he knew what hit him. They bought a nice whitewashed house in the

suburbs, just like one from a family TV show, and it didn't take long to fill it up: a daughter, and then twin boys.

He kept Milda's summoning stone safe (though he never saw the silver dragon again, so he never got to ask where she came from and how Boss met her. Perhaps, Luth figured, it was the same way Kuja got *his* silver dragon-the world would never know), along with the rest of the treasures in the vault. He considered donating the antiques to museums or auctioning them off more than once, but in the end he couldn't bear to part with the things that made the King of Thieves a legendary bandit. What he had didn't matter as much as how he got it.

He once made the mistake of selling the Gastro Fork to a famous restaurant run by Qus, and immediately regretted it-so much that he stole his way onto the premises the following night and took it back-leaving the money they paid in its place, of course. He denied everything to the owner's face, and didn't feel an ounce of remorse. It just disturbed him a tiny bit, how *good* he was at sneaking about and filching. He had an unexplored knack for stealth, innately knowing which corners and shadows to exploit, and even the best colors to wear to blend in with his surroundings.

He didn’t want to condone his actions; trespassing was against the law, after all, and he’d never let his children hear of his “excursions,” but he couldn’t deny the thrill of going in places he was not allowed and emerging undetected. He made repeat trips to the King mansion after-hours, just to admire the paintings. It took him a while to find the best way to out-maneuver the motion-sensor alarms and afford him the most comfortable entry (and escape), but it was effort well spent, as far as he was concerned. He never broke, removed or disturbed as much as a single brick.

“What have I become?” he once asked himself while resting his legs over the eaves of a plantation house on the outskirts of the Lindblum Plateau. The owners had a shiny moonstone that he wanted to see for himself, so he waited for the cover of the stars to get a private viewing-so private, nobody knew he was there.

As he gazed at the blue and red crescents sailing along the horizon, he already knew the answer: he was the King’s successor, the benign bandit-going everywhere, seeing everything, leaving nothing, taking nothing.

It was years later, after everything had settled down and the city of Lindblum had recuperated, more-or-less, when Luth sat down to write a journal. It would be like his renowned grandmother's, only without the big words (literary artistry was one thing he did not inherit, unfortunately.) He didn't have to be a poet, though. His journal was going to be just enough to record a part of Lady Freya's story that she didn't live long enough to see for herself.

He knew just how to start it, and end it.

I never expected to end up where I am, but looking back, there's not a thing I would change about my life. When I first arrived in Lindblum, I was looking for my way. Turns out it's just like my boss once said, "Sometimes you don't find the things you're after most until you stop looking for them."

I'm still not sure where we go when we die, but I like to think that wherever he is, he's with my great-grandmother, Queen Garnet and all the others. I think that's all he ever wanted.

But once I overheard my children telling ghost stories, and they say nowadays, if you visit Lake Cleyra on a full red moon, you might see a white dragon standing vigil out on the water. Sometimes I wonder…

My name is Luthane Crescent.

My great, great-great-grandmother was the legendary Dragon Knight, Freya Crescent.
I'm the CEO of Ultima Express, the largest and most successful shipping company on Gaia.
My friends call me Luth, though most who work with me just call me Lu.

The rest call me the Prince of Thieves.

A/N: Annnnnd roll credits.

Thanks for sticking around and reading my longest fanfiction-or anything written, really-to date. This story is for all the Bosses out there, the ones who challenge you to take a chance and do something batshit crazy once in a while, even if it gets you into trouble.

Special thanks to Kas, Christy, Corey (for the bank robbing idea in chapter 12), Weeper, spider (for Tami), Drew (for himself), Arpy (for helpful feedback), Clayton (for the line about letting hookers into your home, among others) and all my reviewers.
KASLiNN, Charlett, Weeper, Guardian1 and The

RPGenius write lovely fics, and you need to check out their profiles.

I had a lot of fun with this, especially with all the wacky OCs (props again to Arpy, Tami and Drew. And Liaf, oh, little Liaf.) Milda and the White Dragon in particular are (mostly) harmless refs to *Chimera Quest* (my webcomic) that I don't expect anyone to recognize (considering I haven't drawn/written that far yet). Nonetheless, you can find the comic in my profile, as well as the other stories in my Phoenix Chronicles.

(By the way, if any of my fellow crazies want to read the extra racy version of the end of chapter 13, go back and check it again. By damnit, if this fic's going to be stuck with an M rating, it's going to earn it.)

I hardly expected a silly plot bunny like this to get so out-of-hand, but I'm happy with the results. I hope everyone else had as much fun as I did!

Until next time,

the neiphiti dragon

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